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**Change and development in the British funeral industry during the 20th century, with special reference to the period 1960-1994.**

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**CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE BRITISH FUNERAL INDUSTRY  
DURING THE 20TH CENTURY, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE  
PERIOD 1960-1994**

**Brian Parsons**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements of the University of Westminster  
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## Abstract

Historical evidence indicates that the role of the undertaker gradually evolved as the collective responsibilities of family and community for dealing with the dead were passed to a full-time specialist known today as the funeral director.

Around 1900 the function of the undertaker was chiefly to supply the coffin and the means of transportation to the place of disposal. However, due to urbanization and the transition of the place of death from home to hospital, both of which have occurred during this century, the funeral director's role has developed to now embrace that of custodian of the dead. In conjunction with the preference towards cremation, the shift from animate to vehicular power and the adoption of embalming, the funeral director has acquired not only increased responsibility but also considerable control over funeral performance.

Parallel with these developments, a shift in ownership of funeral firms has occurred especially during the last three decades as independent organizations have been acquired by large organizations. This latter type of firm has, it is argued, exploited occupational control attributable to the rationalization of the death and disposal environment by managing their funeral operations on a centralized basis, thus achieving cost savings.

Commencing with an overview of the organization of death and disposal since the fifteenth century, this thesis identifies and examines societal and technical changes that have resulted in the control of the disposal process by formal organizations. It is argued in this thesis that through the large centralized organization gaining a presence in the funeral industry a number of negative consequences are apparent. Firstly, although operational economies are achieved there is no evidence to suggest that these are passed on to the consumer. Secondly, retention of the original trading name deceives the public. Thirdly, through fieldwork conducted in a small, independent firm and within a large centralized organization it is concluded that a degree of depersonalization exists.

It is further argued that the operational rationale of the large funeral organization is being challenged as the recent increase in consumer awareness has led to the question of exploitation, such as through a monopoly market structure. The position is compounded by the emerging trend of newly-established independent funeral directors offering competitively priced funerals.

The final area examined is the issue of professionalization of the funeral director. Reasons why funeral directors embarked upon this quest are examined followed by an analysis of strategies to achieve the objective. The change in the funeral director's role and the issue of stigmatization through bodyhandling are critically assessed in addition to the contribution to the process by the operational policies of the large organization.

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Finally, I would like to thank my supervisor, Robin Theobald, for his astute comments and guidance.

### Abbreviations

BUA Monthly	<u>British Undertakers' Association Monthly</u> Renamed as <u>The National Funeral Director</u> Renamed as <u>Funeral Director</u>
FC (1977)	<u>Funeral Charges Price Commission Report</u> no.22 London: HMSO
FSJ	<u>Funeral Service Journal</u>
MFD (1988)	<u>Manual of Funeral Directing NAFD (1988)</u>
MMC (1987)	<u>Monopolies and Mergers Commission Co-operative Wholesale Society Limited and House of Fraser PLC: A report on the acquisition by the Co-operative Wholesale Society Limited of the Scottish funerals business of House of Fraser PLC (1987)</u> Cm229London: HMSO October
MMC (1995)	<u>Monopolies and Merger Commission ServiceCorporation International and Plantsbrook Group PLC - A report on the merger situation (1995)</u> Cm2880 London: HMSO
OFT (1989)	<u>Funerals: A Report</u> Office of Fair Trading January 1989
OFT (1995)	<u>Pre-Paid Funeral Plans - A report by the Office of Fair Trading</u> May 1995
UJ	<u>Undertakers' Journal and Allied Trades Gazette</u> renamed <u>Funeral Service Journal</u>

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

### The funeral and the funeral director

The funeral is the ultimate rite of passage. (Van Gennep 1960: 146; Grainger 1988: 117). It is a complex social drama (Prior 1989: 155) in which performance and ritual are prescribed by social and religious criteria together with personal preference. As a leave-taking ceremony (Kastenbaum 1981: 221), the funeral has been defined as

"...an organized, purposeful, time-limited flexible group-centered response to death" (Lamers 1975).

The funeral has a number of functions (Pine 1969; Raether 1990: 39; Warwick 1994), the primary ones being an opportunity for the disposal of the body; release of the soul and social interaction. The body is the principal, non-participatory guest at the obsequies; without the body no funeral can take place. (See also Hertz 1960; Huntingdon and Metcalf 1979).

It is the presence of the body that necessitates the existence of a specialist responsible in an agency capacity for arranging the disposal - the funeral director. Whilst the funeral director does not literally effect burial or cremation of the dead, the latter acts as the intermediary between the bereaved and the invariably municipally-managed organizations that furnish the mode of disposal. In one definition of the funeral director the second term alludes to this role;

"...technical adviser, agent, contractor, master of ceremonies and custodian of the dead" (MFD: 1988), [emphasis added]

The occupation of undertaking first emerged in the seventeenth century essentially as a supplier of goods and requisites, such as coffins and associated paraphernalia. As the disposal of the dead increased in complexity especially during the Victorian period the role of the undertaker/funeral director has mirrored this change. Through providing an ever expanding range of goods and services together with the means of transportation, the passage of time has meant that in the 20th century the funeral director has become central - although not indispensable - to the system surrounding funeral performance.

It was not until this century, however, that the funeral director became responsible for caring for the dead body. Whilst the undertaker operating around 1900 encoffined and transported the body, today the funeral director provides the place of reposition in addition to techniques of preservation. Bodies now rest on the funeral director's premises and not at home. A once important community-centered activity - caring for the dead in the familial environment - has now been assigned to this paid, service providing functionary. It is through managing this task that the funeral director has been able to supply arterial embalming to effect preservation of the body for viewing and repatriation.

From the perspective of the funeral director this responsibility for the care, custody and access to the dead has also given greater control over the funeral process. It is embalming that can be considered of key importance to the industry during this



century in terms of occupational development.

In addition to the role of agent the funeral director also fulfils the term technical adviser being a repository of technical information. In defining the work of the funeral director operating in America it is perhaps considered appropriate that Grollman uses the phrase:

"...Caretaker, caregiver & gatekeeper; that is caretaker of the dead, caregiver to the bereaved...[and]...from the perspective of the community...the secular gatekeeper between the living and the dead" (quoted in Leming and Dickinson 1972: 311).

Change in responsibility for care of the dead is only one area in which the funeral director has had to respond. In terms of preference towards disposal, cremation has replaced burial as the preferred mode of final disposition. Whilst in legislative terms it is relatively complex compared to burial, as a highly rational method of disposal cremation has had a significant impact upon the funeral director and upon the services and goods supplied. Cremation has presented funeral directors - particularly those in urban areas - with the opportunity to increase the number of funerals carried out in a time period, thus working more efficiently and rationally.

Funerals are resource-intensive operations. A range of staff with specialist skills, knowledge, equipment and vehicles have to be utilized to achieve each funeral. The same level of resources must be maintained irrespective of the number of funerals

managed in a given period thus indicating the high level of fixed costs.

When instructions are received to undertake funeral arrangements a series of planned and co-ordinated physical and administrative tasks ensue that culminate in the ultimate disposal by burial or cremation. The removal of the body, embalming, coffin preparation, viewing, bearing the coffin and driving vehicles embrace the former, whilst negotiation with funeral 'officiants', the cemetery and/or crematorium, coroner are examples of the latter.

The vast majority of responsibilities - particularly those relating to or directly involving the body - take place behind closed doors. Although in the current climate of consumer watchfulness funeral directors are encouraged to provide a breakdown of costs, it would be fair to say that few clients realize what is involved in terms of time and resources to complete one funeral. The occupational associations make strenuous attempts to point to the fact that the average funeral takes about 40 man-hours to complete (Hodgson 1992: 97).<sup>1</sup> It is this lack of "dramatic realization" (Goffman 1959: 40) that can be identified as a problem for the industry in terms of cost accountability of what the funeral director actually performs. Because of this complexity, preparation may take several days, but the actual funeral may be completed within an hour and a half.

Faulkner (1995) deems that those working with the bereaved require the following

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<sup>1</sup>Maguire (1996: 145) increases this to 42 hours.

qualities: warmth; empathy; skills at effective interaction and "...the ability to use one's own losses to help understand other people's reactions to death "(1995:9). For the occupation of the highly personal service of funeral directing sensitivity and tact can be appended to this list. From a more internal perspective a predilection for administration and the organization of resources must also be part of this overall make-up. As a service industry it is susceptible to unpredictability of demand, which in turn often makes the work environment stressful - a situation compounded by the immediate effects of loss, such as denial and anger. Although the funeral director may be responsible for currently managing anything up to five or more funerals at any one time, from the perspective of the client he/she must endeavour to treat each funeral as unique. A high degree of precision is also required as funerals are highly personal occasion which cannot be repeated. Errors whether attributed to the funeral director or not can be reflected in the future reputation of the organization (Hunnaball 1994: 57).

However perceivably indispensable the funeral director has become in the late twentieth century, it is clear that in assuming a greater service-providing capacity he occupies an ambiguous role. For a number of reasons, the principle ones are:

First, the funeral director handles the dead and as such the role is stigmatised (Goffman 1963). At the moment of death, the newly dead become objects of contamination and are relegated to closed quarters. Those coming into contact with the dead are regarded as in some sense to be tainted - a trait which affects 20th century society's perception of funeral service personnel. It is an issue of which funeral directors are fully aware and

which they seek to address through portrayal of a professional image.

Secondly, the occurrence of death necessitates an encounter with the funeral director. Although 20th century society is often referred to as death denying (Kellahear 1984), it is the presence of this functionary that seeks to confirm the reality of death. Consequentially, as a reaction against this role, Rando states,

"Death is more removed from our society; we try to deny it, but we are more vulnerable to it. We have modified our funerary rituals to reflect these facts and have turned the final rites surrounding death over to professionals often criticizing them for performing the precise functions they are assigned" (1989: 24).

Thirdly, as mentioned above the funeral director provides a service in the initial stage of grief. Brown (1995: 163) terms this a "distress purchase". Funeral arrangements are a commercial transaction and in the atmosphere of shock generated by loss it is possible, from the perspective of the bereaved, to see how the funeral director can be accused of profiteering from their misfortune. It is not surprising therefore that the role can often prompt a disparaging reaction from the bereaved. As Fulton notes,

"The guilt generated by desire on the part of the bereaved to rid themselves quickly of the body and the death itself, the possible confusion and anxiety in the selection of the "right" casket, and the attitude of the funeral director as the constant reminder and associate



of death, prompt the public to lash out at him" (1965: 101). (See also Harmer 1963; Mitford 1963)

As Brown notes:

"There is no doubt in our minds that it is appropriate to deal with these things - but they are not things any one wants. They are a service, which as you know, people would rather not have to call upon" (1995: 162).

Despite the difficulties presented by these issues, the funeral director nevertheless provides an indispensable function as the fact remains that the vast majority of the bereaved are not willing or able to undertake what this functionary supplies at a time of loss. Yet the funeral director levies a charge for tasks undertaken for an inevitable occurrence in which society no longer wishes to be involved or be exposed to the details. Hence, as Habenstein states;

"In dealing with the bereaved, the funeral director operates in an atmosphere of tension, distress, and easily displaced hostility" (1962: 242).

## The Funeral Industry

Funeral directing is a service industry and as such exhibits all the usual characteristics of that sector (Elvy 1991: 71); a measure of unpredictability of demand, intangibility and the inability to store (although goods used in the provision of this service can be, such as coffins).

In terms of cost, funeral performance utilises high capital-intensive resources. As outlined above, each funeral involves the use of specialist equipment and facilities that must be available to meet demand at a moment's notice. Maintaining vehicles and staffing costs are the most costly overheads incurred by funeral firms. These are fixed overheads attracting expenditure irrespective of their degree of utilization. In contrast, however, variable overheads for each funeral are low and essentially represent the coffin, fuel for vehicles, administration, telephone calls, etc. It is this situation of high fixed costs per funeral that is crucial to the change in the organizational structure of the industry during this century.

Although the precise number of funeral directing firms operating today in England and Wales is unknown, it is estimated that approximately 4000 organizations exist (OFT 1989). Around the turn of the century the vast majority of funeral firms in existence were family-owned and managed - a factor not unsurprising considering the historical relationship of the family and community in body and funeral preparation. During this century there has been a gradual separation of ownership from control as the large organization has sought to expand its position by acquiring family firms. Whilst the last

three decades have witnessed considerable activity, it must be recognized that the independent firm still predominates in terms of market share.

In conjunction with social and demographic change and as the small independent family firm has experienced problems of succession, large organizations have acquired family firms. It is argued here that in conjunction with increased responsibility towards the body and because of the greater preference towards cremation, large firms have been able to utilize centralized principles of resource management. All vehicles, manpower and physical resources are maintained in one location thereby achieving efficiency of operation. Whilst effective centralized operations provide a high degree of control, the clear rationale behind such a strategy is a reduction in cost per funeral, therefore a greater level of profitability is achieved than in a small funeral organization.

Large organizations manifest a bureaucratic approach to funeral management. In conjunction with this point it is argued that whilst such developments are largely unpredictable to the consumer - the bereaved - such workings have resulted in a comparative degree of depersonalization of the funeral experience. In operational terms it is further argued that an additional consequence of centralized management has been the deskilling of the work of the funeral director as in this environment tasks are fragmented amongst specialist functionaries.

### The purpose and scope of the research

The purpose of this research is to examine the reasons underlying the causation and effect of organizational change on the British funeral industry during the 20th century. The analysis will consider attitudes to death, technical and social factors that have redefined the funeral director's role, thus providing the opportunity for the large organization to manage funerals on a centralized basis. However, it is the presence of the large organization that has operated to change dramatically the manner in which funerals are internally managed. Through centralization of resources, it is argued that a Fordist assembly-line approach to the management of funerals has emerged, largely as a result of the bureaucratic style necessary to manage large scale operations. The consequence this has had upon quality of service will be a key consideration.

### The research intends to do the following:

- a) To examine organizational change in the funeral industry during the 20th century and particularly industrial change as manifest in the rise and operational techniques of the large organization during the last three decades.
- b) To examine the influences and consequences that have stimulated increased control of the body by the funeral director, thus permitting funerals to be managed on a centralized basis.



c) To identify why the occupation has pursued professional status and how it has approached this objective.

d) To contrast the internal and external operational aspects of a small independent firm with those of the large organization managing funerals on a centralized basis.

### Research sources and methods

Whilst researchers undertaking investigations into certain death related subjects such as bereavement, attitudes to death or funerary architecture will display an ever-expanding plethora of literature and resources, it is material specifically relating to the funeral industry and the work of the funeral director that is decidedly spartan. What does exist is often a re-hash of usually dated material.

The dearth of basic information is surprising and unfortunate. For example, as mentioned above it is not precisely known how many funeral directors operate in this country (Gore 1993) or the precise extent to which embalming is practised. Neither of the two relevant occupational associations can provide this data. However, whilst information and literature directly concerning the industry is sparse, even related issues appear to avoid reference to funeral directing. For example, in the key texts concerning the foundation and development of the Co-operative movement, no mention is made of their funeral activities. Such avoidance is surprising considering that in aggregate the

Co-operative societies are reputed to arrange in excess of a quarter of the annual number of funeral taking place in England and Wales.

A second example of the deficiency of information within funeral directing is the area of industrial unionism. Although the funeral industry is a comparatively small employer, a trade union existed (and still does although the identity has been lost through merger) exclusively for employees. The executive of the National Union of Funeral Service Operatives called a strike in 1977 and although it was covered in the national press, academic journals of industrial relations made no mention of this unique example of unrest with far reaching consequences.<sup>2</sup>

The data for all chapters with the exception of 5 has largely come from secondary sources. Although as mentioned above only sparse literature specifically relates to the industry, recent years have witnessed the appearance of texts on many aspects of death and disposal. Many of these provide a broad perspective of change in terms of attitudes. For the following chapters trade periodicals have been extensively examined to furnish information on technological developments in the industry. This has been particularly important with respect to the development of embalming and progress of cremation. In addition, these texts have also provided evidence confirming the quest for professional

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<sup>2</sup> Information on funeral service unionisation was limited to the following: correspondence by the author (1991) with the former general secretary of the union revealing its formation, merger and membership composition and statistics; consultation of about seven copies of the union newsletter from the 1950s held by the British Library; details of the 1977 strike as reported in The Times and the Funeral Service Journal and the outcome of pay negotiations located in the Industrial Relations Review and Report.

development by the funeral director. Material directly relating to individual firms has come from examination of company records held on both private and public deposit:

In terms of access to funeral organizations in order to conduct research, problems have been encountered by Smale (1985) and Howarth (1992). One reason for initial denial of access may arise from the general wariness within the occupation of the media whose sceptical treatment of the funeral director's work - particularly concerning the economic environment of funerals - is a constant source of concern to the industry. Over-inquisitiveness by non-clients is frequently construed to produce opportunities for misrepresentation. A further reason for this apprehensive attitude towards researchers derives largely from the business environment in which the industry functions. Like other service and retail organizations, funeral firms operate in a competitive and potentially profitable market. Information such as the number of funerals and sources of work are closely guarded secrets.

The writer's current and past connections with the industry created a situation of already "inside" a seemingly closed and clandestine business environment. The introduction to chapter 5 discusses the issue of access and outlines the fortunate position that the writer shares with Gore (1993) and Pine (1975) in not requiring a gatekeeper.

## Prior research on the funeral director and funeral industry

As mentioned above, since the 1960s there has been a resurgence of publications based upon research into death related matters in the UK; the bibliographies of Walter (1993 & 1994) illustrate the scale of academic interest. This largely follows the trend in the USA. Texts specifically concerning the funeral industry have, however, been few. With the exception of Litten (1991) who terminates his historical analysis at the end of the nineteenth century, research into industry concerning this century has largely been confined to academia. One of the first was Smale (1985) who looked at the role of British and Canadian funeral directors from a sociological perspective. Howarth (1992) took an ethnographic approach in her study of a funeral director in a family organization operating in the east end of London, setting his function against the dramaturgical metaphor of the theatre.

It is in the writings of Naylor (1989) and more recently of Gore (1993) that parallels with this research can be identified. Naylor adopted an organizational perspective in respect of the management of death in a Northern city by embracing not only different types and structures of funeral directing firms, but also the role of the clergy and crematoria and their interaction with the bereaved. In Gore's (1993) oral history factors that caused the transition from the undertaker to the funeral director during this century specifically in the region of east Kent are examined.



Whilst this research draws on material presented in the latter two texts, differentiation is provided by this thesis specifically examining the effects of organizational and structural developments upon the internal environment of the funeral firm and the occupation of funeral directing. The impact of forces such as cremation, care of the body and transportation, and their combined effect upon the structure of funeral firms is the focus of this thesis, together with an assessment of the influence upon the professional status of the occupation.

This lack of literature dealing with the UK can be contrasted to the funeral director operating in the USA where a significant number of serious publications exist. (See Pine (1975); Habenstein and Lamers (1995); Farrell (1990); and Raether (1990).

## Outline of chapter contents

Chapter 2 provides a review of the organization of the disposal of the dead from about 1450. Starting with the role of the family and the informal response to death and disposal as displayed by the community, it moves through the centuries to identify changing demands and the increasing complexities resulting from the overtly bureaucratic management of the dying and death process during the 20th century that necessitates use of a specialist functionary. Changing attitudes towards death during the 20th century prelude a consideration of developments in the environment of dying and funerals that have taken place in the last two decades.

Chapter 3 identifies and examines the changing role of the undertaker/funeral director in terms of the impact of urbanization, public health, regulation and the preference towards cremation upon his function. In this chapter it is argued that the combined effect of these changes and particularly the shift in responsibility of care for the body has created a rationalized environment of funeral performance. The overall increase in control of the process by the funeral director has given organizations the opportunity to centralize operations and thereby enhancing profitability.

Chapter 4 surveys the types of organization present in the industry from 1900 to 1994. Commencing with an examination of the role and suitability of the family unit in the management of funerals, the chapter will then consider problems facing the small organization. From this an account of the transition from the predominance of the family-owned funeral organization to the presence of the large formally managed firm will be presented in conjunction with an analysis of how the latter type of organization approaches funeral performance. From this, evidence will be presented to support the argument that this style of management has lead to depersonalization of funerals and deskilling of the funeral director.

Chapter 5 reports the findings of field research conducted to examine the operations of three types of funeral organization with contrasting approaches to the management of funerals. The primary purpose of the fieldwork is to investigate operational differences and their relationship to the degree of personalization. The first firm operates a centralized system to serve the requirements of thirteen branch offices. The

organization is owned by a large specialist funeral firm. The second is a recently established independent firm managed by its owner and operating through one unit.

Chapter 6 examines the process of professionalization of the funeral director. The problem of definition of a profession and what constitutes the process of professionalization will firstly be considered. In the following section a thorough examination is made of why the occupation sought to acquire professional recognition. The key reason identified for seeking professional status is the attempt to overcome stigmatization arising from bodyhandling in addition to the economic environment in which the occupation is situated. The final part of the chapter will indicate and discuss how the industry has attempted to elevate its position and role. The purpose of this section is not to arbitrate as to whether the occupation is or is not a profession or whether it has or has not succeeded in this process, but merely to identify and comment upon how it has sought to achieve this objective.

The conclusion will summarize the main arguments in this thesis and provide indications of likely areas of change in the environment of funerals and funeral directing in the future.

The demand for this type of research

As mentioned above, although a modest amount of research has been carried out into funeral directing, it is important to go beyond the distinguishing features of prior research and focus upon the rationale of this thesis.



Factors underlying the effects of change upon the funeral industry have largely escaped critical evaluation. For example, the importance of custody of the body and the role of embalming have been neglected. It is perhaps important to note here that much misinformation exists concerning embalming and the rationale and extent of its use.

Whilst a descriptive account of the growth of certain funeral organizations has been provided by Hodgson (1992), no appraisal has been undertaken of the reasons why a section of the industry expanded through acquisition and merger during the last three decades. The two government-led investigations (MMC 1987 & 1995), whilst providing evidence to indicate monopolistic trading conditions, did not appraise the reasons underlying such a situation, nor the operational mode of such organizations. In this research the factors giving rise to the strengthening of the large organization and the ability to operate on a large scale basis are analyzed.

## Chapter 2 - The disposal of the dead - an historical and organizational overview

"We are born in organizations, educated by organizations and most of us spend our life working for organizations. We spend much of our leisure time paying, playing and praying in organizations and when the time comes for burial the largest organization of all - the State must grant official permission" (Etzioni 1964: 1)

Whilst the words of Amitai Etzioni confirm that death in the latter part of the 20th century has not escaped regulation by bureaucratic organizations, it is not merely the management of disposal that has undergone significant change over the centuries. The whole arena of dying and death has gradually shifted from informal collective control by the community to the formal environment dominated by the expert. Similarly, attitudes towards death have changed during this period and it can be seen that many of the beliefs held by society today have arisen from the gradual process of change that has occurred especially as a result of distancing from the physical proximity of death. In this chapter the organizational management of death and disposal from about 1450 is explored together with an account of the developments and changing attitudes towards death.

### Medieval Death

Death in medieval settlements was met with an informal response from family and the community. Death usually but not always occurred in the setting of the home and thus frequency of exposure to death provided contact and indeed familiarity with the realities of death. Just as birth was a familiar occurrence so too was the angel of death;



life expectancy in 1640 was 32 years. Medical science was less than primitive and with death occurring in the home, families were frequently also exposed to painful and horrific death-bed scenes. Ariès (1981) uses the term "tame death" to describe how the expiration of life was then regarded as an inevitable consequence and in which control was held by the dying person.

Society's actual management of death at the time in terms of organizing the disposal must be viewed from two perspectives. Firstly, the function of the community and secondly, the role of the Church.

The response to the occurrence of death in a community at this time was collective, but informal. When death occurred in the home the body would remain there until such time as the grave had been prepared for the burial. Firstly, the body would be laid-out; a task assigned to designated women who were invariably also responsible for the delivery of babies. Such duality of role was a further indication of the collective strength of the community through familiarity of contact.

After the body had been prepared the church's involvement in the disposal commenced. The church was a focal point of community life and one of its major roles was to maintain a guild which provided the mechanism for the co-ordination of the funeral. These guilds sought to provide the necessary finance to pay the clergy for conducting the funeral liturgy, the interment, expenditure on candles, etc. (Litten 1991: 6). Litten (1991: 9) identifies three major functions performed by the parish guilds in the burial of the dead from the thirteenth century; the selection of those to

carry the coffin; to ensure the coffin arrived safely at the church and place of burial and providing necessary accoutrements; and lastly to attend the wake the following day. These semi-formal guilds were operated by local people specifically for utilization by the community. Monetary contributions were collected from the poor; they were pooled and endowed. Essentially, these guilds were operated by local people for themselves. Although their precise working arrangements are unknown, Litten (1991: 86) surmises that their role was not that dissimilar to today's funeral director. Such terms that the Manual of Funeral Directing applies to the twentieth century funeral director, for example master of ceremonies and agent, equally apply to the guilds operating in the early modern period (MFD 1988).

Through the church the guild would organize use of the temporary communal or "parish" coffin which was reused for subsequent funerals. The deceased would be encoffined at the house or "chested" (Gittings 1984: 114) and carried on a hand bier to the church and then to the grave. On arrival the body - decently covered - was removed from the coffin and placed into the grave.

The second function of the church was to provide the actual place of burial. The churchyard - an area set aside for burial adjacent to the church building - was the only place for burial in the community. It is interesting to note that the actual physical moment of interment was of little significance taking place after the mourners had attended the funeral liturgy (Gittings 1984: 31). Similarly, the physical place of burial was not of importance as no memorial would be erected over individual plots to commemorate the deceased. Thus the area was literally communal. Further evidence of

this collective attitude towards death can be found in the use of the charnel house.

When a new grave was required it was likely that interred bodies would be disturbed. Plans of grave locations were not maintained and when bones were discovered they were placed in a charnel house in the churchyard. It was often the responsibility of the guild to maintain this building. In the charnel house the remains were collected and stored together without identification. The churchyards served as a continuous reminder to those going about their daily business of mortality and the unpredictability of death. Reinforced with this familiarity of death was the Christian theological teaching that warned of the horrors of the grave and the torment that awaited sinners. Death at this time was therefore not only to be physically, but also spiritually feared. It was clear that the whole community was exposed to death and through various contributions all were involved in the funeral ritual.

### Death in Early Modern and Reformed England

Around the 16th century a significant change towards death in terms of attitudes can be detected. Gittings identifies the underlying factor as the growth in the belief in the "... uniqueness and importance of the individual" (1984: 9).<sup>1</sup>

The rise of individualism is complex. Essentially it resulted in a shift in belief from the

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<sup>1</sup>Although widely referred to in conjunction with this period of death research, it should be noted that Gittings is not without her opponents, for example Houlbrooke (1989).



interchangeable binding of individuals to that of human beings occupying an irreplaceable position in society. Its causes are closely bound up between a shift in economic and community relationships. Dealing with the economic environment, Stone points to the effect of economic change which gave "...greater personal and familial autonomy and a relaxation of community discipline" (1977: 172).

As communal farming controlled by guilds and feudal principles declined, a market economy emerged giving rise to free wage labour. Geographic mobility and the growth of London led to the family enterprise emerging and operating in an economic climate of market forces. It was the growth of trade and commerce which created a bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie came to manifest possessive individualism (Stone 1977: 173). Under this philosophy man was

"... egotistical, vain, envious, greedy, luxurious and ambitious. His main desire was to differentiate himself from his neighbours in some way or another" (Stone 1977: 173).

Secondly, in respect of familial change, slow erosion of kinship and community can be detected. As the power of land owners declined, control possessed by the state, both on a local and national basis, increased. Stone identifies a number of reasons for this decline. The feudal practice of extending hospitality to all and sundry was reduced to the intimate family circle; the emphasis was placed on responsibility for crime and action resting with the individual; similarly freedom to support an ideology gradually emerged. Worthy of note was the increasing role of the church in education together

with the Christianization of society and the encouragement of high moral standards (Porter 1989).

The shift in attitudes and social arrangements represented a departure from a lineage society to a civil society. With market economy and the growth of the state system, communal ties were gradually broken. During this period creative forces in the form of drama and literature also appeared as expressions of this burgeoning sense of individualism (Llewellyn 1991).

In terms of death and funerals this predominating perception of life and self created considerable consternation as the grim reaper robbed the world of an irreplaceable mortal. As Gittings expresses,

"The crisis of death is possibly the most severe of all the problems resulting from an individualistic philosophy" (1984: 10).

Death now took place against a backdrop of an

"...intellectual stance... emphasis[ing] the difference, rather than the continuum, between the soul and the body and between the two states of life and death" (Gittings 1984: 13).

The dilemma caused by death under this prevailing philosophy not only changed beliefs but gave rise to a reorganization of funeral ritual which was reflected in the desire to



separate the living from the dead. Such increasing separation of the dead body from the living is perhaps the most significant force - both directly and indirectly - in the rise of individuals and organizations responsible for the management of the corpse after death and the funeral ceremony. It is in the light of these developments during the late sixteenth century that the initial signs of the rise of a commercial enterprise to manage death and funerals can be detected (Litten 1991: 13).

During the reign of Elizabeth I funerals of the aristocracy were subject to the regulations of the College of Arms, a division of the Royal Household. The purpose of the Heraldic funerals was essentially political; to preserve continuity of peers. During the funeral ritual the accoutrements of power would be passed to the heir and in doing so emphasised the continuity of the aristocracy. The whole proceedings were supervised by heralds from the College. The preparations for the obsequies were often lengthy and it is during this period that embalming would be carried out - one of the first texts on embalming appeared at this time<sup>2</sup>. It must be pointed out that this embalming technique bears no resemblance to that practised today. Although surgeons were employed to practice the craft, Gittings points to undertakers ruining embalming,

"...which suggests that this aspect of the provision of services for the dead was already being undercut by the nascent profession very early on in its development" (1984: 105).

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<sup>2</sup> Greenhill T (1705) Art of Embalming

As heraldic funerals were a display of power the College acknowledged the likelihood that persons from the lower social ranks would mimic the ritual or use accoutrements supplied by the College intended for the exclusive use of an heraldic funeral. Fines could be levied if allegations were proved. However, the enforced extravagance of such funerals was growing unpopular with the aristocracy as the expenditure and the attendant ritual was gauged according to title and standing. Such rates could not be challenged as the College was in a monopoly position.

#### Death Post-1660

It is important to note that heraldic funerals were compulsory for the nobility. However, the lesser classes imitated the ritual and to do so turned from the guilds to the tradesman who could provide the requisites for a funeral. It is in the light of such a move that the first commercial funeral enterprises appeared. Essentially it was a case of supply meeting demand. Thus the services of the carpenter and coach master could be utilised without reference to the guild.

This fledgling industry was given impetus by the continuing dissatisfaction being expressed towards heraldic funerals by the nobility, a situation which gradually led to the commencement of nocturnal funerals at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Funerals in the night represented the darkness of death, human frailty and

"...dramatised the sorrow of the bereaved" (Gittings 1984: 912).<sup>3</sup> Gittings (1984: 189-90) identifies a number of factors that contributed to the rise in nocturnal ceremonies. Firstly, the cost of a heraldic funeral was often considerable and the nobility were obliged to accept the charges of the heralds themselves operating in a monopoly position. In addition, the macabre process of embalming acted as a sufficient deterrent for its advantages to be rejected. In conjunction with this point it can perhaps be argued that as the College of Arms' management of funerals decreased the interval between death and nocturnal burial was significantly reduced, thus rendering the techniques of preservation redundant. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that embalming reappeared - albeit in a different form.

Perhaps the most important factor that caused the decline in Heraldic funerals was their decreasing value in terms of individualism. These funerals were highly stage managed public affairs that conformed to a prescribed ritual. Disquiet with the limited personal expression and also with the manner in which women were treated - heraldic funerals placed great emphasis on the continuity of male peerage - coupled with the growing desire to express grief in a more private fashion led to their decline.

It is towards the end of the seventeenth century and the decline in heraldic funerals that records emerge of the first undertaker. Litten (1991: 17) cites William Boyce opening a shop c1675. However, it was William Russell's undertaking business that received approval from the College of Arms to undertake certain funerals that

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<sup>3</sup> It is significant that the word funeral is derived from funeralis - Latin for a torchlight procession (Raether 1990: 31).



eventually sounded the death-knell of the College and usurped the Herald's function (Wagner 1976: 302). Following the death of Queen Mary in 1694 and funeral a year later, the College realised that private enterprise had become a significant competitor. Coupled with the fact that society and particularly the nobility had reviewed its obsequial requirements it is surprising that the College lasted until 1751 (Litten 1991: 19).

Undertakers started to emerge in London - the location where the population was concentrating. The early undertakers would have been responsible for organizing the following tasks: provision of a coffin and encoffining the body, and supervising the ritual of the funeral on the day together with transportation.

By the eighteenth century the coffin had become a permanent receptacle for the body as opposed to a temporary container. It had also become a status symbol through the degree of expenditure lavished on its construction in terms of quality of wood and ornamentation. Four basic types of coffin were in use at the time (Litten 1991: 100) each possessing an additional degree of protection through the use of double and triple outer cases and lead interiors. As such this marketable commodity was a valuable source of income to the undertaker. In the light of these requirements the emergence of a whole supporting industry of coffin furnishing manufacturers can be seen. Inscription plates and ornaments for attachment to the exterior of the coffin appeared in a variety of metals from the manufacturers. In addition, shrouds and soft furnishings for the interior of the coffin became readily available through specialist manufacturers. In an effort to encourage the wool trade in England, the Woollen Act of 1660 sought

to enforce an injunction that everyone should be buried in a flannel shroud. The Act was strengthened in 1678 by imposing a fine for those who did not comply. Litten (1991: 76) notes that as a by-product of this Act the printing industry profited as an affidavit had to be completed confirming adherence to the regulations. The indirect effect of this act of intervention was to aid the commercial presence of the funeral industry as it complied with the provisions of the Act. However, the industry also received increased financial satisfaction from the role played by executors in the death and disposal process. The Reformation had shifted the control of the funeral ritual from preparation by the dying to the bereaved following death (Rowell 1977). Undertakers sought to relieve the executors of the responsibility by becoming a one-stop supplier, thus equipping the goods and services required for the funeral. However, it is through the undertaker providing these utilities, that finance for the highly social and supportive occasion of the traditional wake was exhausted. Gittings (1984: 96) argues that through encouraging the executors to extend expenditure on a funeral befitting the person's standing in life, undertakers eroded this event of great psychological value to the bereaved. From this stage the emphasis on expenditure became concentrated on the goods and services the undertaker could supply for the ritual of the funeral rather than other activities. It is perhaps worth noting that with the rise of the undertaker came also the notion still in existence today of an industry making profits from an inevitable occurrence, a theme further discussed in ensuing chapters.

On balance it must be pointed out that the community was still exposed to the facts and harsh reality of death. The home still remained the place where death invariably occurred and where bodies remained until the time of the funeral. Whilst it is likely



that numbers attending the funeral and the post-funeral feast started to decline for the above reasons, a network of communal support was available for the bereaved as he extended family, neighbours and friends all had access to view the corpse and extend sympathies.

The 18th century undertaker increasingly operated in the capacity of an agent between the bereaved and third parties, such as the clergyman and churchyard. Consequently changes instigated by these groupings are likely to influence his work. The undertaking trade was without statutory or guild regulation at this time.

During the 18th and 19th century aspects of death and disposal were undergoing many changes. Their development was to have a profound effect on the funeral industry and give rise to attitudes that are present still today. During the 18th century the problem of grave robbing by "resurrectionists" was reaching immense proportions. There was no legal method of procuring bodies for anatomical teaching apart from claiming them from the gallows - a source of supply which as medical science progressed did not equate with demand. Anatomists required fresh dead bodies for examination and the churchyards were seen as the primary source. In their attempt to foil the attempts of the grave robbers undertakers provided strong coffins that would give security. Richardson (1988: 272 & 1989: 113) argued that this response by undertakers contributed towards the professionalization of the industry in the eyes of the public. Whilst the display of ostentation at the funeral demonstrated wealth and social status, a greater level of security could be provided by the expenditure on the coffin - a move that operated to further the financial position of the undertaker. However, in

conjunction with this aspect both Richardson (1989) and Rugg (1992) point to the rise of the private cemetery as indicative of protecting the corpse against ending up on the anatomists' table. However, whilst the undertaker and the cemetery met the need of the period the actual threat posed by grave robbing receded by the enactment of the Anatomy Act 1832 which legitimized the source of bodies - from the workhouse.

### The Victorian Celebration of Death

The demand for expenditure and ostentation did not subside with the diminution in the threat of grave robbing. In the ensuing period - a period that has come to be termed the Victorian Celebration of Death - funeral expenditure increased considerably.<sup>4</sup> Funerals - particularly those of the lower classes - were characterized by their degree of display and expenditure; the dramatic sight of the horse-drawn cortège conveying the black veiled mourners to one of the newly opened necropolises where a family plot had been purchased has been recounted numerous times in literature.

A number of reasons can be attributed to the continued desire to "...display respectability in death" (Richardson 1989: 115). For example, funerals helped to establish social position (Curl 1972: 20). If there was social status in life there had to be self-respect in death and ostentation was seen as a means of proving respectability. As

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<sup>4</sup>This period has been extensively covered by a number of writers, the most important being Cannadine (1981), Curl (1972), Morley (1971), Richardson (1989) and May (1996).

Richardson states,

"The funeral came to be a rite of passage par excellence in which to assert financial and social position - a sort of secular last judgement" (1989: 111).

The Victorian funeral also reflected the prevailing romantic view of death. Rowell (1970: 50) notes the cult of the death-bed scene is reflected in much Victorian literature. In addition it was also an era where death was understood from the perspective of the Christian tradition, itself embracing Calvinistic teaching. It is from the romanticism that sentimentality grew in the form of material objects acting as memorabilia of the departed. For the Victorian it was this romanticism that not only dramatized death but personalized the funeral (Morley 1971: 16).

The necessity for funereal expenditure was heightened by the caveat of a pauper's funeral which bore a stigma lasting well beyond the grave (Laqueur 1983: 109). Thus we can see that the conduct of Victorian funerals was governed by money and custom, hence the widow requesting the undertaker to provide what was "customary and proper" (Morley 1971: 24). Puckle (1926: 97) recounts the narrative (probably late nineteenth century) of a newly married woman whose husband died and the widow was forced by neighbours to increase her expenditure on "widow's weeds". As a further example, Puckle reports the statement made during a funeral arrangement when the client requested a plain elm coffin to which the undertaker replied;



"...you can't have any thing but polished oak in a road like this" (1926: 98).

It is largely from this social convention to emulate wealthier classes (Curl 1972: 8) that undertakers can be seen to have seized the opportunity to capitalize upon the prevailing attitude. What resulted was an exploitation of the bereaved and particularly those at the lower end of the class scale.

The growth of what had become to be known as the "dismal trade" in the nineteenth century was immense as it was seen by many tradesmen as a lucrative side-line due to the relatively low capital requirements and that transport and manpower could be hired from carriage masters. Litten (1991: 26) notes that a hierarchy developed in the trade dictated by the extent to which undertakers possessed the resources to equip the funeral. However, it is clear that in sub-hiring resources the cost of funerals increased (Morley 1971: 24) (see also Chadwick 1843).

The demands of the increasing number of undertaking establishments was met by supply through the vast wholesale funeral furnishing manufacturing industry that had emerged. Firms such as Dottridge Brothers and Ingall, Parsons, Clive provided the trade with everything from coffins and shrouds to hearses and horses. Prevailing social convention also gave rise to the growth of allied industries, such as mourning wear and jewellery (Taylor 1983: 194). The supply of black crepe contributed significantly to the expansion of the firm Courtaulds.

Obsequial expenditure during the early part of the period was considerable and Chadwick reported that between £4 and £5M was "...annually thrown into the grave" (1843). In the light of this, it is not surprising that Dickens used the term "...the fat atmosphere of funerals".

Cannadine maintains that

"...it is arguable that the Victorian celebration of death was not so much a golden age of effective psychological support as a bonanza of commercial exploitation" (1981: 191).

Although the Victorian celebration of death performed a number of functions for the bereaved (Littlewood 1992: 31), there is much evidence to support Cannadine's claim that it was also a period of considerable corruption.

One major area was the burial club into which the poor contributed money in an effort to prevent a pauper's funeral (Cecil 1991: 92). Morley (1971: 24) and Litten (1991: 191) refer to financial impropriety and fraudulent management of the clubs' funds. It would appear that the trustees - usually an undertaker and a publican - were often the only major beneficiaries. In some circumstances bodies would be retained at home until funds were available, thus increasing the risk of infection and disease. The enforced display of ritual at funerals - encouraged by both the undertaker and social convention - did not escape the attention of the master of social observation Charles Dickens. The most frequently cited example is that of the text of a dialogue contained in Household



Words where he restates the sales techniques employed by the unscrupulous undertaker.<sup>5</sup>

The scale of corruption must be viewed in perspective and for a number of reasons it is certainly doubtful whether unethical practices could be alleged against the whole industry. Firstly, the scope for malpractice would have existed in the urban areas rather than the rural settlements. By the Victorian era urban dwellers had come to utilize undertakers as a matter of course, whilst those in the rural communities would have still relied on the more collective involvement of the extended family and the familiar non-core undertaker in the preparation and ritual.

Secondly, the services of the undertaker were only one part of the funeral and it is conceivable that others involved in the whole arena of death that had developed, particularly those involved in the disposal process such as the private cemeteries, the Church (Jupp 1993) and monumental masons had the opportunity of "cashing-in". As with the situation today over disbursements (fees payable before the funeral to third parties, such as the cemetery) from the examination of funeral records indicate that there is evidence to demonstrate these were likely to be a third of the total cost of the funeral.<sup>6</sup> Jupp (1990: 4) points to the disparity in funeral fees paid to clergy to that of the weekly wage of an agricultural labourer.

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<sup>5</sup> Dickens C "The Raven in the Happy Family" from Household Words 1850-9. See Morley (1971:12).

<sup>6</sup> Consultation of the records of two central London undertaking firms - JH Kenyon and W Garstin - confirm this.

Thirdly, the increasing number of deaths in the urban areas encouraged the full-time specialist undertaker. Whilst investment for the non-core undertakers who hired resources such as vehicles and manpower was limited, for the carriage master a high level of investment in capital goods was necessitated. Rumour would be a sufficiently powerful deterrent against malpractice, particularly if the firm operated in an area with much competition.

An increasing feature of the re-emergence of interest into the subject of death has prompted the scholarly examination of many of the images of Victorian funerals held in popular culture. For example, Chamberlain and Richardson (1983: 39) and more recently Adams (1993) have re-evaluated the status of the laying out women and dismissing the corrupt and drunken character of the Mrs Gamp figure as portrayed by Dickens. It is important to note that the nineteenth century was a time of immense development in the organization of death and disposal. Despite the alleged corruption the whole arena of death and disposal was becoming increasingly formalized and it is the compound effect of these changes which by the end of the 19th century can be seen to have had considerable influence on the whole undertaking industry. In the following section two important areas of change are identified together with a commentary on their effects on the general organizations of death and dying - cemeteries and legislation.

## The Private and Public Cemetery Movement

The first area of organizational change concerns the emergence of cemeteries of which brief mention has already been made. Up to the beginning of the 19th century, the church possessed the monopoly on burial space. However, it was clear that as writers such as Dickens and Walker (1839) illustrate the need to reform burial arrangements for sanitary reasons was paramount.

Curl noted that the Victorians rebelled against:

"...the attendant horrors of over-crowded burial grounds, drunken gravediggers, body-snatchers, the ever-present stench of corruption, and the sight of bones carelessly thrown up from yawning graves..." (1980:22).

Despite recurrent outbreaks of disease and model cemeteries appearing in locations such as Calcutta (Curl 1986a and Lacqueur 1993), the government was loath to act. One of the first cemeteries was The Rosary in Norwich which appeared in 1821 (Nierop-Reading 1989: 48). The fact that it was established in Norfolk by non-conformists was significant; Brooks (1989: 8) notes the tradition of dissent in this region.

Although a small number of cemeteries appeared around the beginning of the 1820s, for example Chorlton Row and Every Street both in Manchester (Brooks 1989: 9), the turning point came with the opening in 1825 of the Liverpool Necropolis under the



auspices of a private company. It provided a highly respectable and organized place for the dead to repose and was an immediate success. London's first cemetery at Kensal Green was opened in 1832. The immediate success of these cemeteries led to a *cordon sanitaire* (Meller 1994: 11) around London, with others soon following at Abney Park and Brompton (both 1840).

There are three important points to note about the establishment of these cemeteries which had implications on attitudes to death, the future of funerals and the work of the nineteenth century undertaker; ownership and control of the cemeteries; the siting of the cemetery; and legislation.

Firstly, whilst the first few cemeteries were established by non-conformists the ensuing necropolices were formed and managed by private companies.<sup>7</sup> They all had a board of directors and shareholders desirous of a return for their investment and correspondingly the companies were obliged to maximize revenue. Dunk and Rugg (1994: 10) estimate that by 1853 sixty private cemetery companies had been established. By providing burial ground organizations such as the General Cemetery Company and the Abney Park Cemetery Company effectively breached the Established churches' monopoly on provision. Like the cemeteries established by the non-conformists, these burial grounds effectively reduced the churches' income of burial fees (Morley 1971: 39) (Mytum

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<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the development of the nineteenth century private cemetery company see Rugg (1992). More general studies of the development of cemeteries can be found in Curl (1972 and 1980), Brooks (1989) and Meller (1994). Many texts trace the development of specific cemeteries, among the most weighty include: Joyce (1984) Abney Park; Barnard (1990) Leeds and Barker (1984) Highgate. For Paris see Etlin (1987)



1989: 292) and double fees for non-parishioners, in addition to providing their own chapels which replaced the need for utilization of the parish church prior to interment, thus reducing the pastoral link. In contrast to the established church which charged a fee for the interment alone, the private cemetery companies sold the exclusive right of burial thereby providing the owner with a sense of possession, thus satisfying the ownership needs desired by the aspiring middle class (de Tocqueville 1945: 2:145). In respect of the latter point deeply dug graves were often termed "family" graves, a symbol much appreciated by the Victorian culture. Although the threat of body-snatching had subsided, the cemeteries were seen to provide permanence in terms of security, hygiene and aesthetics (Barnard 1990:5). In the high walled surroundings of the cemetery the owner could exercise the right (after paying a fee) to erect a permanent memorial representing a personal expression of remembrance. Cemetery companies operated a *laissez-faire* policy (Brooks 1989: 11) where expenditure provided status. The companies sold graves according to a graded class system with an appropriate scalar pricing schedule according to the location. Rowell (1970: 53) alludes to the fact that iron railings around the vault drew attention to the class division it created. Following the purchase, the cemetery company would issue "deeds" - not unlike house ownership.

The most feared class of grave was the paupers' (or common) that was not purchased and could accommodate up to fourteen coffins. Lacqueur (1993: 198) notes the calculations made by one company in respect of the marginal increase in costs for digging a seventeen or eighteen feet grave. The companies actively encouraged artistic and sculptural expression and many were financially linked to monumental masonry firms. Mausolea, catacombs and vaults were all valuable sources of income. Thus the

nineteenth century cemeteries became areas where tangible expressions of grief could be displayed in the form of memorials. Whilst the latter contributed to the rise of an allied occupation of monumental masonry - such burial chambers also gave undertakers opportunities to supply stout lead-lined oak coffins. It is significant to note that many monumental companies were located opposite the cemetery gates, and often appointed as "official" masons to the cemetery.

The domination of private organizations in what was becoming an increasingly competitive market, especially in London, sought to eliminate dubious practices such as selling coffins or coffin furniture back to undertakers. Proprietary cemeteries prospered on their reputation and allegations of such actions would have a considerable effect on future business. However, there is evidence to show that the private companies did pay commission to undertakers for recommending the cemetery and receiving same according to a graded scale for securing the purchase of a new grave, for example the Abney Park Cemetery Company<sup>8</sup>. Lacqueur states that *douceurs* paid to undertakers "...were too high" (1993: 199). Thus as agents of the company undertakers were, for the sake of commission, in a position to influence the clients. It was a particularly odious system and one that today has thankfully largely ceased. There were, however, instances of financial irregularity at private and municipal cemeteries, as recounted by Curl (1980: 234) and Barnard (1990:14) at Highgate and Nunhead and Leeds respectively.

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<sup>8</sup>The balance sheet and profit and loss account of the Abney Park Cemetery Company for 1900 clearly indicate "Commission to Undertakers". These documents form part of the archive retained by the London Borough of Hackney local history library (consulted 1993).

Secondly, the siting of the new cemeteries is strategic as it represented the first of threefold phase that can be seen as stages in distancing the living from the dead. The cemeteries were situated away from the conurbations in what were then rural areas and transportation was required for access; in 1830 Kensal Green was open country (Curl 1980: 214). The Royal Borough of Kensington established its cemetery at Hanwell in 1855, some 6½ miles to the west of Kensington. The records of JH Kenyon show that an allowance of two hours was made to reach Hanwell by animate power in March 1900.<sup>9</sup> Mutes walked at the side of the hearse (Curl 1972: 5) until the cortège was out of town then climbed aboard for the onward journey. Thus distance increased journey time which the commercial undertaker would have to take into consideration when costing funerals.

Perhaps the most ambitious example of this distancing concept was that of the London Necropolis and National Mausoleum Company in establishing the vast cemetery at Brookwood, Surrey in 1854. The dead (with their mourners) were conveyed by rail to the cemetery (Clarke 1988).<sup>10</sup> In respect of this notion of distancing, the second stage of separation represents the shift of the place of death into the institutionalized environment of the hospital and final stage being the funeral director assuming responsibility of the dead on his premises.

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<sup>9</sup>Consulted 1993.

<sup>10</sup>A second short lived cemetery railway ran between Belle Isle near King's Cross to the Great Northern Cemetery in the 1860s. See Curl (1986b) for further information on this form of transport.



Thirdly, from their foundation the private cemetery companies were gradually constrained by legislation that sought to regulate the practice of interment and prevent burials being carried out without the completion of express legal formalities. For example, The Burial Act 1853 provided procedures for the maintenance of records and plans (Polson, Brittain and Marshall 1953: 152). The 1850 Metropolitan Interment Act forbade burials in urban churchyards. Whilst this provided a healthy prospect for the commercial organization, the Act also gave powers to the Board of Health to purchase these companies and establish their own local cemeteries. Comparatively few private cemetery companies were formed after the 1850 Act, as local authorities took this obligation seriously. The involvement of local government in the organization of burials from 1860 matched its increasing role in other sanitary matters, such as water supply, drainage and refuse disposal.

## Legislation

With the formation of the proprietary cemetery company legislation arrived in the form of the Cemetery Clauses Act 1847. This Act simplified the procedure for establishing a private cemetery as it was regarded as being for public benefit. As Brooks (1989: 42) notes, it is interesting that the Act's sanitary provisions were minimal. Public Health matters were dealt with three years later through the Public Health Act 1850 which gave municipal authorities the impetus to establish cemeteries. These were the first in a long series of legislation concerning the broader aspects of the disposal of the dead. In



the exclusive ambit of cemetery management there was creeping regulatory provision; Polson, Brittain and Marshall (1953: 149) note that between 1852 and 1906 fifteen Burial Acts were enacted.

In 1836 two major pieces of legislation appeared. Firstly, the Births and Deaths Registration Act placed obligations upon indicated informants to present standardized information to a Registrar. Broderick (1966: 9) states that the Act had two main purposes; (i) to facilitate legal proof of death, and (ii) produce more accurate mortality figures. This legislation replaced a further gendered role occupied by women - counting the number of dead for recording in the "bills of mortality". Formalization replaced this inefficient and inaccurate (Green and Green 1992: 6) system, although recent reports suggest that reforms are overdue to simplify the documentation and procedure<sup>11</sup>.

Secondly, the Attendance and Remuneration of Medical Witnesses at Coroner's Inquests Act was passed to enable the Coroner to authorize a physician to perform a post-mortem. It also formalized the payment system of the office of the Coroner. Other matters directly relating to registration appeared in 1837, 1874 and 1893 (Broderick 1966: 9-10) and for the Coroner in 1860 and 1887 (Broderick 1966: 114-115).

To meet the demands of burials taking place in ground other than that owned by the Church, legislation regulating exhumation was introduced in the form of the Burial Act

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<sup>11</sup> see Registration: Proposals for Change - The Government's recommendations for reform of the system of registering births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales (1990) London: HMSO Cm939

1857 (Smale 1993: 191). Consequently, the Home Office - the State - became the arbiter and source of authority for permission, thus confirming the words of Etzioni (1964: 1) that heralded this chapter.

Whilst legislation created formality in the management of the private and municipal burial operations, the funeral industry was devoid of any control. There was no statutory legislation regarding entering or operation of the industry - a direct contrast to the United States that had introduced licensing in 1895 (Raether 1990: 2).

### The end of the 19th century

Towards the end of century there is evidence to indicate areas of change which had the effect of reducing funerary excesses. For example, Morley (1971: 76) points to the emergence of The National Funeral and Mourning Reform Association in 1875. Although little is known about this organization it was concerned with the

"...excessive cost and cynical manipulation of funerals by undertakers" (Morley 1971: 192).

In confirmation of this, although perhaps exceptional, there is evidence to suggest that undertakers were introducing a degree of transparency into funeral costs. Advertisements placed in the local press and directories by a number of undertakers operating around 1900 in the west London area contain their scale of charges with a

full description of each coffin and services.<sup>12</sup>

However, the greatest area of change can be seen to emanate from the new rationale mode of disposal by cremation, although it was to be some fifty to sixty years before the full effect was to become apparent. With the first cremation taking place at Woking in 1885 and still only 0.01% of all deaths in England and Wales being cremated by 1900, it was clear that cremation was not a favoured alternatives by the end of the last century. However, formal acknowledgement by the government had been received - although the legislation did not appear until 1902 (Strutt 1976: 5). It is significant to note that in parallel with proprietary burial, it was the Cremation Society - a charity - and commercial organizations that were responsible for building the first four crematoria in this country in contrast to the state or the Church.<sup>13</sup>

### Attitudes to death in the 20th century

The First World War is often indicated as the starting point of change in attitudes towards death. Gorer notes that,

"As the grief became more intense, and bereavement more widespread, the ostentation of mourning declined even further" (1965: 6).

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<sup>12</sup>For example, see JH Kenyon advertising in the Kensington News and West London Times October 20 1899 and Kelly's Directory - Kensington 1900.

<sup>13</sup>See Jupp (1993) concerning the origin of the Cremation Society



It is a date confirmed by Ariès (1974) and by Taylor in terms of a "...breakdown in funeral and mourning etiquette" (Taylor 1983: 266). However, Cannadine (1981: 193) argues that such changes were under way long before this period, primarily caused by the fall in the death rate from improvements in housing, sanitation, public health, diets and more favourable employment conditions. In conjunction with this latter point, it is also likely that the primary objective of the cemetery movement as a place of sanitary reposition was being fully realized.

It is from the decline in mourning customs that Gorer (1965) attributes the beginning of the denial of death, although again there is evidence to show that this denial commenced a century earlier (Leaney 1989). Whilst the debate continues, what is unmistakably clear is that WWI introduced factors previously not encountered by society which can be seen to have pressurized change in the manner of disposal. The fact that WWI was fought abroad claiming the lives of so many young men worked to realign the relationship between the bereaved and the dead. The body was not returned home and burials decidedly minimalist in character were conducted on the battlefield (Gray 1989: 44). As the body is the most important guest at the funeral its absence has become to be viewed as a significant factor in hindering the recovery from grief. In the ensuing years of post-WWI Britain there was not a return to the pattern of mourning as seen in the previous century as grief manifested itself in two new forms. Firstly, the Armistice movement and secondly an interest in spiritualism (Cannadine 1981: 227).



The construction of the Cenotaph (the empty tomb) and village war memorials, the establishment of the annual poppy day and the two minutes' silence on 11 November can be viewed as a public, collective display of grief. There was unity and solidarity in mourning as so many families from all social backgrounds experienced loss. Conversely, the Spiritualist movement was a private denial of death (Cannadine 1981: 227) where the bereaved sought to experience personal contact with dead. Littlewood (1992:34) sees hearing and experiencing the dead as a common encounter of the bereaved and spiritualism provided the medium of contact.

Of somewhat less importance and worthy of passing reference but of contrast to the above was the rise of the American religion of Christian Science in the immediate post war years in Britain, especially in the more affluent middle and upper class urban areas and particularly amongst unmarried women. Central to its teaching was the denial of disease and death, thus emphasising a complete spiritual continuum of life. Gorer (1955: 51) notes the length to which denial was taken as even in the Movement's world-respected newspaper The Christian Science Monitor the word death was not allowed to be printed.<sup>14</sup>

Whilst World War I separated the living from the physical presence of death by distance on an unprecedented scale, it was the impact of improvements in medical science (in conjunction with diet refinement) that can be identified as the fundamental

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<sup>14</sup> The movement reached its zenith in the 1930s (Lowther Clarke (1932). See also Fisher (1929).

reason behind continued separation. As medical science progressed the hospital became the formal focal point for treating the living, whilst also becoming the newly established place of death. This shift from the home to the institutionalized environment in the post-war years can be seen as the second in a three-fold scheme of separation - as mentioned earlier - that started with the place of disposal being transferred away from the living to out-of-town cemeteries in the 19th century.

The result of death occurring in the modern bureaucratic setting of the hospital was that it has become hidden from sight (Blauner 1966). In this institution death became

"...transposed, insulated, technologized and decontextualized" (Kastenbaum and Aisenberg 1976: 208; see also Rando 1989: 23).

Mauksch (1975) points out that as the hospital with its primarily function of healing had become unresponsive to the needs of the dying patient. As the dying defy the efficacy of treatment the notion of deficiency in the ability of the medical profession is created. In this context the dying are regarded as deviants.

The shift in the place of death has also led to a change in the control of the dying as it is now the prerogative of the medical profession (Ariès 1974) and administrators. This has led to modern death occurring in the confines of the hospital becoming an isolating experience either partially or totally from the perspective of the dying. Unlike death in the Middle Ages there is now an absence of immediate communal support. Not only do deaths frequently occur with no one present, but the post-loss support of the family and

friends comprising the community is not always present. Of 785 bereaved, Cartwright et al (1973) state that only one quarter were present when death occurred in a hospital. Essentially, death has gradually become "privatised". (Walter 1990: 66).<sup>15</sup>

As soon as deaths occur in the hospital a highly rationalized process now sweeps into action. Standardized and legalized procedures are followed in the area of medical certification (Blauner 1966) and prioritization of the manner in which relatives are informed (Huntington and Metcalf 1979: 199) (See also Glaser and Strauss 1968, Sudnow 1967 and Mulkay 1993). Further impersonal procedural systems follow in the registration of deaths or those reported to the Coroner. Prior (1989: 157) notes that at this stage the body is at its lowest status. Following the lines of bureaucracy it is treated in an impersonal way, for example marital status is lost through an almost exclusive use of surname-only, whilst record keeping and form-filling take precedence (See also Naylor 1989). The uniform shroud is provided.

The institutionalization and medicalization of death has had a considerable effect on 20th century attitudes and a number of inter-related points can be made.

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<sup>15</sup> In concurrence with the changing place of death it is significant to note that birth also become subject to the organizational setting of the hospital. A further parallel can be detected as legislative forces effected birth mainly through the enactment of the Midwives Act 1902 and consequently from a gender perspective the female neighbourhood midwife became to be replaced by the male obstetrician. Further to this the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1926 imposed restrictions on the registration and disposal of stillbirths (Broderick 1966: 12).



Firstly, through the increase in life expectancy that has occurred since the last quarter of the previous century, society has become conditioned to expecting that it is only the elderly that die. Blauner (1966) sees that the increased longevity of people in the 20th century as serving in contrast to that experienced in the previous. As more elderly people die society is less acclimatized to death. Illich et al (1977) indicate that past generations accepted death as an inevitable consequence of mortal existence. He believes that contemporary society sees death as something that will be gradually triumphed over. Its occurrence therefore in the young is more often than not regarded as negligence on the part of the medical profession (Illich 1977; see also Littlewood 1982: 7).

Secondly, from this changing attitude towards death Gorer developed a taboo thesis that appeared in his seminal article of 1955 entitled "The Pornography of Death". Whereas sex was a forbidden or "unmentionable" (Gorer 1955: 50) subject in the Victorian era, it has been replaced by death in the 20th century;

"The natural process of corruption and decay have become disgusting as the natural processes of birth and copulation were a century ago..." (Gorer 1955: 51).

Thus the body is regarded as dirty and a pollutant; as a source of contamination it is to be avoided. The dirty work of body handling is assigned to lowly workers - the hospital porters and then ultimately the funeral directors. In respect of the latter the mortuary is usually in a unsignposted and marginally accessible location thus giving credence to the



"invisible" nature of death.

Gorer also believes that the physical experience of dying and death by society has been replaced by a voyeuristic preoccupation. At the time he was writing (Gorer 1955: 51) the horror comic containing graphic representations of death and mutilation were becoming popular chiefly among the younger generation. Certainly the quantity of death-related media portrayals that have emerged since the late 1950s that have been identified by Kears (1988: 379) provide confirmation of this. As Palgi and Abramovitch (1984: 403) point out whilst we shield ourselves from natural death we nevertheless let ourselves become exposed to violent images of death via the media. Penson (1990: 17) sees that as dramatized images, these all-powerful representations on TV and video, etc. make death more unreal.

Thirdly, as death increasingly occurs in the highly regulated, formal and sanitized environment of the hospital, society has consequently become less knowledgeable and therefore less experienced about the practical process of dying and death as well as supportive mourning rituals. Although Parkes sees no reason to suggest that this society actually denies death any more than previous ones, it is however "...dead ignorant about death" (1996). With the decline in social support the bereaved are left to mourn alone at home, devoid of social support and often with few practical tasks with which to occupy themselves.

### Attitudes to Death: 1939 to 1994

Whilst the number of British fatalities as a result of WWII were at a lower level than that of the previous war, it is important to note that death and destruction were experienced at home as well as abroad. The numerous German offensives including the Blitz resulted in mass fatalities. In addition and again in contrast to WWI loss was experienced on an individual as well as a global level (Cannadine 1981: 232). Not only were the atrocities in the concentration camps a terrifying example of man's inhumanity to man, but also the far-reaching and long-term effects unleashed by the comparatively simple act of dropping one atomic bomb on Hiroshima killing at least 70,000 (Leming and Dickenson 1985: 289) followed by a second on Nagasaki. Death and destruction on such proportions was indicative that the human race might destroy itself. As United States President Truman announced when the explosion occurred:

"It is an atomic bomb. It is harnessing of the basic power of the universe....What has been done is the greatest achievement of organized science in history" (Quoted in Leming & Dickenson 1985: 289).

It is the fear emanating from nuclear warfare that Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976) attribute to the increasing public interest in death related subject in America. However, in post-WWII Britain there was no return to the Victorian customs of mourning nor to Spiritualism. Nor did the Armistice movement receive continued momentum which by 1946 had already changed to the Sunday prior to the 11 November (Cannadine 1981: 234).

## Death in the latter part of the 20th century

Although it is generally held that death is the greatest taboo of the second half of the twentieth century, there can be no doubt that in the last quarter of this century there has been a re-emergence of interest into the subject of dying, death and disposal. The quantity of publications cited by Walter (1993 & 1994), reports into funeral costs, Victorian cemeteries acquiring groups of "friends", the formation of bereavement support groups such as Cruse, The Natural Death Society and The National Funerals College, the appearance of a UK-published academic journal, university courses and the popularity of both the "The Art of Death" and "Mexican Day of the Dead" exhibitions (the latter lasting two years) signify confirmation of a re-discovery of interest.

In terms of the changing place of death, the hospice movement has emerged in the 1960s to cater for the needs of both the dying and their carers (Saunders 1990). As a place specifically for the terminally ill - as opposed to the hospital where the emphasis is on survival - the hospice encourages those within to face death. It was a reversal of prevailing medical philosophy, as Littlewood expresses,

"...[the] hospice involves a change in perspective from "nothing more can be done" to "we must provide the best kind of human care possible for this person"" (1992: 16).



Palgi and Abramovitch draw attention to the fact that the hospice movement is a

"...revived cultural phenomenon that was common in medieval times and has its roots in early Christianity" (1984: 404).

They see the hospice movement as a reaction to the bureaucratization of death responsible for generating the loneliness of the dying. Certainly in this environment the needs of the dying and their families are met on an individual basis in an effort to re-establish the "good death". In the light of the AIDS pandemic purpose-built establishments such as London Lighthouse have appeared to cater specifically for the needs of those affected by HIV and AIDS and their carers. The death of so many young males have caused not only those in peripheral groups but also families to face death before the commonly held span of "three score years and ten".

However, away from the newly instituted physical surroundings of the place of death and the plethora of academic interest, evidence exists to suggest that the communal nature of funerals and mourning is being re-evaluated. Consequently this has prompted a re-evaluation of whether death was really a taboo subject during this century. The vast majority of academic writers have been influenced by the cogent reasoning of Gorer (1955, 1965) who provided one major text at a time when there was a dearth of serious critical and independent examination into death and mourning rituals. Within the last fifteen years Gorer's arguments have been disputed by Cannadine (1981), Kellahear (1984) and Walter (1991a). The evidence submitted by Walter (1991b) in respect of the extensive display of mourning rituals following the deaths of 95 football



supporters at the Hillsborough Stadium, Liverpool in 1989, demonstrates that a residue of solidarity exists in the largely working-class Merseyside area where certain rituals, such as large floral display at funerals are still in evidence. (See also Searle and Chew 1990 & Clarke 1996: 13). At the time of writing (April 1996) one minute's silence - nationwide - was observed on Sunday 17 March to mark those shot in the Dunblane massacre.

In other related areas there is evidence to demonstrate that a more participatory and therefore more personal role is being taken by society in mourning and funeral ritual. Funerals for previable foeti, stillborn, neo-and perinatal-deaths increasingly take place (Kohner 1993: 285).<sup>16</sup> Parents become involved in the decision making process and the funeral provides a

"...focal point and permissible outlet for [parent's] grief and that of their friends and relatives" (Murphy 1990: 80).<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, since the advent of AIDS the funerals of many HIV-related deaths have

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<sup>16</sup> Pre-viable Foetus is a human foetus of less than 24 weeks gestation that has at no time shown any visible life signs. A stillbirth is a child that shows no signs of life after complete expulsion from its mother after the 24th week of pregnancy. A perinatal death is a child dying after 24 weeks in gestation, including a still-birth, or a child born alive but who dies within the first seven days. A neonatal death occurs within 28 days of birth, irrespective of the duration of pregnancy.

<sup>17</sup> In conjunction with this point it is worthy of mention that the place of birth has turned full circle and is increasingly the home in contrast to the hospital.

taken place with considerable participation from partners, friends and families. DIY funerals similarly are often understood to be carried out in a desire to allow the bereaved an opportunity to become involved at the time of grief.

It is these and the prior mentioned developments that have had a marked effect on the work of the funeral director and will be considered in the following chapter.

## Conclusion

Throughout this analysis shifts can be detected in the manner in which society has managed death and disposal. From the family and church responsibilities were transferred to formal economically-motivated organizations, such as the College of Arms. When the Heralds declined, undertakers emerged in the role of the paid functionary to supply the requirements for a funeral. From this an industry emerged to meet the need created by urbanization and an increase in the absolute number of deaths.

Whilst the undertaking trade attracted an unsavoury image in the 19th century, it is clear that reforms occurring in areas of death and disposal created order and formality which in turn made an impression on the funeral industry. Legislation provided the regulatory framework; the private joint-stock and then public cemeteries provided the formally managed resting places. The scope for corrupt practices had reduced and by

the conclusion of the 19th century members of the trade - particularly in urban areas - were anxious to commence a process of self-improvement.

During the 20th century considerable changes have occurred in the death management system as a result of the institutionalization of death and the increase in the preference for cremation. In conjunction with changing attitudes to death and the relocation of the body to the institutionalized medical environment, the responsibility of the funeral director has increased. Consequently, formalization has increased in most aspects associated with the death and disposal process.

However, in the late 20th century there is evidence to suggest that a rediscovery of death related matters has occurred. As a result, the process surrounding dying, death and disposal is becoming increasingly critically examined.

### Chapter 3 - From Undertaker to Funeral Director: Factors of change in the 20th Century

#### Introduction

During the 20th century the role of the undertaker has changed considerably both in operational and organizational terms. As the involvement of the family and community in the process surrounding death and disposal has declined, the responsibility of the funeral director has increased. In conjunction with other changes, the result is a highly rationalized death management system.

In this chapter it is argued that factors underlying this increase in occupational responsibility have shifted control of the funeral to the funeral director. The combined effect of these developments has been to present the large funeral organization with the opportunity to manage funerals on a centralized basis thereby achieving increased operational control as well as cost economies.

Commencing with an account of the role of the undertaker operating around the turn of this century, the chapter then identifies initial emergence of centralization within the industry around 1900. In the following section, areas which have increased the formalization of the death and disposal environment such as urbanization and public health, legislation and cremation are discussed in conjunction with the contribution towards control of the process by the funeral director, particularly, coffins, transportation and embalming.



## The changing role of the funeral director

During the 20th century the organization surrounding death and disposal can be seen to have increased considerably in terms of degree of formalization. Similarly, the role of the community and extended family in the death process continued to decline in its role of providing invaluable support to the bereaved. Cope (1970: 3) speaks of the nearness of death becoming less familiar. In his commentary on life and death in Staithes during the 20th century Clark (1982) suggests that death has gradually become "professionalized". Contact with death takes place at a

"...distance or through intermediaries, in the form of bureaucratically organized agencies which perform the duties and tasks once held to be the responsibility of the community or family....Now the Co-op has it all" (Clarke 1982: 8/9).

Consequently, as Walter notes:

"With geographic mobility, family members find themselves cut off from old community traditions, and, unsure of what to do, are more than willing to hand everything over first to the hospital and then to the funeral director" (1991a: 300).

Clarke's choice of words are clearly important as it is through the gradual distancing of death that the function of one of these agencies - the funeral director - has increased in

importance.

Whilst it could be argued that at one level the funeral director takes "...all the pressure off..." (OFT 1989: 24), it can also be argued that the functionary disables (Walter (1994: 17) mourners by preventing them from becoming involved in preparations.

### The funeral industry at 1900 - the undertaker and carriage master

At the turn of the century the majority of people died at home where the body remained until the time of the funeral. The undertaker would call at the house to obtain a body measurement and return with a finished coffin or wooden "shell" - an inner case into which the body would be lifted. If the latter was used a finished coffin would be brought to the house on the day of the funeral. For the funeral the undertaker provided the means of transportation; in the urban areas a horse drawn hearse and following carriages for the journey to and from the cemetery; in the rural environment a hand bier for conveying the coffin to the churchyard. This summarizes the main funeral-related tasks of the undertaker. Undertakers' descriptive price lists and advertisements in local newspapers for a number of west London undertaking firms confirms this statement.<sup>1</sup>

As the following chapter will discuss further, undertaking firms in operation around the turn of the century were family owned and managed. The unit essentially consisted of a

workshop for the labour-intensive task of coffin making together with office accommodation. Because death occurred at home where the body remained until the time of the funeral, there was no necessity for a chapel of rest.

Although there is evidence to illustrate that some small firms possessed their own funeral transport, it is clear that the vast majority of such firms simply did not possess an equipped stable, a hearse and following carriages and therefore could not survive without utilization of the services of the carriage master. Clearly, with the competition in terms of the number of firms that existed in London around the turn of the century it would simply not have been economically viable for small firms to possess and maintain such specialist resources.

In terms of the future direction the industry and from the perspective of this study the function of the carriage master is strategic as it represents the primary form of centralized control of funerals, as the following points indicate.

Firstly, although the small family business was largely operated on semi-formal lines, the type of work in which the carriage master was engaged necessitated formal and defined working practices. Essentially, the basic operational rationale of the carriage master can be identified as that of centralization as they supplied services from a pool of resources to small firms.

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<sup>1</sup>Price lists issued by JH Kenyon c1900.



As funerals were (and still are) time- and labour-intensive, careful monitoring was necessary to prevent the possibility of the vehicles and manpower not being able to fulfil a pre-arranged engagement. To achieve this objective a bureaucratic approach was taken towards the work, particularly in the area of employment. The quantity of labour that a carriage master required necessitated the employment of manual workers with defined duties, such as stable hands and coachmen.

Most carriage master undertakers were family owned and often employed a substantial workforce. Dottridge Brothers to the east of the City of London and Henry Smith at Battersea can be cited as examples, the latter possessing a stable of some forty horses. In central London, JH Kenyon supplied vehicles and manpower to sixteen firms in the vicinity - essentially their competitors.

Dottridge and Kenyon appointed employees with specific skills and defined tasks. It is significant that in 1919 employees from the latter organizations formed the British Funeral Workers Association (BFWA).<sup>2</sup> The emergence of this union for employees follows on from the British Undertakers Association registering as a trade union in 1917.<sup>3</sup>

The effect of the two organizations' negotiations were to agree working practices,

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<sup>2</sup> Author's correspondence with the General Secretary of the Furniture, Timber and Allied Trades Union October 1991.

<sup>3</sup> As chapter 6 points out, the latter title is perhaps a misnomer as although the BUA participated in collective bargaining it can really be classified as an employers' association.



conditions of employment and minimum wages. For example, the agreement between the BUA (London Centre) and the BFWA for 1925 details the classifications of workers, piece rate for coffin finishing and polishing and all distance work (Wilson and Levy 1938: 133-39). However, it was in the area of work where the formalization of demarcation could be detected. As Wilson and Levy write,

"Coachmen may not act as bearers while driving nor may chauffeurs act as bearers except on country work where bearers are scarce or, where owing to limited accommodation, extra bearers cannot be taken" (1938: 125).

Whilst it could be argued that the mutually agreed negotiations effectively set and maintained a standard, for example, through the provision of a minimum four or six coffin bearers on each funeral, the more immediate effect was to increase the overall cost of funerals. More important, however to this discussion was the possession of bureaucratic characteristics on the work of manual operatives. Whilst the family firm brought a unitary perspective to the industry, the presence of unionism within the carriage master organizations created a pluralistic dimension. Although those in the former firm may have their own aspirations, consensus is assumed unlike the pluralistic setting where differing objectives and perceptions may result in that conflict.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Only one serious industrial dispute instigated by the union - a strike - occurred in 1977. See Smale (1985: 164) for a full analysis.

The second point that can be identified as relevant to the following section is the cartel-like situation that surrounded the supply by the 'carriage masters. All BUA members were compelled to use the carriage masters and the latter were instructed not to supply non-members of the BUA. BUA members were therefore all charged a uniform rate for utilising the services of a carriage master which was added to the other variable costs of the funeral - the coffin - and the fixed overheads, including the owners' wages and any profit objective. Such occupational control effectively sought to create a cartel. By the indispensable nature of his supplies, the latter was therefore in a dominant market position. In fact, there is evidence to show that carriage masters were trading in almost monopolistic conditions.

Whilst the function of the carriage master essentially represents the first example of large-scale operation, a considerable number of developments have occurred during the 20th century that have increased the degree of control over death and disposal and control over funeral performance. In the following headings factors contributing not only to the opportunity for the funeral director to centralize operations, but also the creation of an rationalized environment of disposal are identified and analyzed; 1) legislation; 2) cremation; and 3) care of the deceased.

### 1) Legislation

Whilst the increase in medicalization in the inter-war years can be seen to have radically formalized society's management of death, in the same period legislative

changes were effected relating predominantly to the process of disposal. Firstly, through the enactment of the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1926 all deaths had to be registered and a certificate issued before disposal could take place. (See Etzioni's quote at the beginning of the previous chapter). Previously, registration could be effected after burial. The predominant reason for such action was a further safeguard in attempting to disguise crime before full registration. The position regarding stillbirths was also revised as was the repatriation of bodies to and from England and Wales. Strict bureaucratic and complex procedures had to be followed (Broderick 1966: 13).

Secondly, the Coroners (Amendment) Act 1926 sought to regulate the system of medical certification of the cause of death. Consequently, the Coroner could now hold a post-mortem examination without opening an inquest.

Thirdly, although disposal by cremation was only marginal - around 2% - the Cremation Regulations 1930 were introduced to provide minimum operational standards for the management of crematoria.

Fourthly, the Public Health Act 1936 gave a Justice of the Peace powers to authorise the disposal of bodies for whom no funerals arrangements have been made and also for ensuring infection is contained through limiting movement and contact with persons dying from a notifiable disease.

Kalish (1985: 14) maintains that through bureaucratization the needs of the dying individual and family members have diminished and the focus is now on the role of the



medical professions. The same can be expressed in respect of the disposal process - the formal organizations now dominate as the bereaved place everything in the hands of the funeral director.

## 2) Cremation

The most noticeable change this century in terms of funeral performance and as a major contributor to the rationalization of funeral performance has been the shift in the mode of disposal from burial to cremation. Under the above general heading specific issues relating to cremation and the funeral director are discussed in the following sections; cremation and rationalization; cremation, rationalization and the funeral director; and cremation and transport.

### Cremation and rationalization

At 1900, 0.07% of the number of deaths in England and Wales were cremations; by the start of WWII they represented only 3.9%. However, it was in the post-war years that a considerable increase in cremations was recorded and particularly in the period 1945-65 when cremations rose from 7.8% to 45.5% in England and Wales. In the same time period the number of crematoria that opened increased from 58 to 184. It was finally in 1967 when the number of cremations first exceeded that of burials.



Jupp (1990: 23) identifies five "triggers" responsible for the dramatic increase in cremation. Firstly, the familiarity of mass and violent death under war conditions encouraged a reappraisal of traditional mourning customs. Secondly, the rise of the Welfare State - through making funerals less expensive for the poor. Thirdly, the erosion of communities reduced the need for expensive funereal exhibition. The post-war residential developments, such as high-rise flats also prevented the opportunity for neighbourhood appreciation of lavish displays. Fourthly, cremation met the ideals of the local authorities whose cemeteries were becoming full and who required land and finance for house building purposes. Fifthly, Jupp records a shift in attitude by three functionaries associated with the death process. The clergy - particularly the Roman Catholic as the Pope had finally lifted the ban on cremation in 1963; funeral directors - though improving operational efficiencies; and the medical profession - who viewed the signing of cremation documents as a lucrative source of revenue.

Jupp (1990: 25) also points to three changes in the "contexts" of dying: societal; religious; familial. Within the first and the last categories it is interesting to note the distancing of generations through the presence of the professional in the death process, thus supplanting tasks which the family would have carried out.

The theme of distancing that has been of such strategic importance in influencing 20th century attitudes continues through cremation in a more literal manner. Firstly, in legislative terms the Cremation Act 1902 ensured that no crematoria is sited less than 200 yards from a dwelling place. Whereas crematoria in pre-war Britain were located within the cemeteries (often in the disused Non-Conformist chapel) there was usually

ease of access for the living as these grounds once located in comparatively rural, but now urban areas. Post-war crematoria have tended to be built on green-field sites or the outskirts of towns away from the living (Walter, Littlewood and Pickering 1995: 581) and necessitated visitation by motorised transport (Davies 1995:6).

Secondly, the principle of cremation is to consume the body to an irreducible minimum. The residue - the cremated remains (commonly known as "ashes") - are often strewn or scattered within the Gardens of Remembrance attached to all crematoria. Although most crematoria can provide the approximate location of dispersal, unlike burial there is no fixed location (Davies 1990: 160) and no grave to tend. Through constraints on space the opportunities for individual expression are diminished through this literal separation of the presence of the body resultant of destruction by fire. Entry of details in the communal Book of Remembrance appears to be the most customary form of memorialization. Corresponding with the attitude that regards the body as a source of contamination and corruption, the cleansing nature of cremation - an attribute advocated in propaganda literature - reflects the 20th century desire to sanitize death.

Whilst the early advocates of cremation pointed to its attributes of cleanliness, efficiency and land-saving, similar reasons for opting for cremation can be detected today (Parkes 1995). It is through these aspects that the need to sanitize the polluting nature of the corpse is confirmed. Yet as cremation has become increasingly popular a whole system has developed as a highly controlled and organized culture regulated by legislation, documentation and formal procedures. The local authorities - organizations

generally recognized as notoriously bureaucratic - dominate in this field and often the facilities are managed by a department whose primary function is far removed from death, for example, arts and recreation or leisure services (Dunk & Rugg 1994: 68).

The following points indicate the degree of formalization; documentation; service timing; space limitation; cost-efficient operation.

Firstly, in order to prevent cremation where the death may be due to undetected crime, an elaborate medico-legal system of documentation has been devised. Formal application must be made by the next-of-kin or executor in all circumstances and other documents from the medicolegal fraternity must be submitted for scrutiny by a independent physician - the Medical Referee.

Secondly, the increase in demand placed upon crematoria has resulted in the strict timing of services, usually at half-hourly intervals - the actual service being confined to 20 minutes, although a double time can be booked (if available). At the end of that time another funeral party will be waiting to use the chapel. With such a constricted schedule the late running of a cremation service on a busy day with no breaks in the service schedule can have serious repercussions. Davies (1995: 22) argues that such a problem fosters the notion that funerals are managed on a "production line" or "conveyor belt" system. From an alternative perspective it could also be argued that the actual mechanical method of committal is the foundation of this notion - an argument rejected by Davies (1995).



Thirdly, space limitations within the grounds of crematoria restrict the forms of memorialization. Usually the Book of Remembrance is the only permanent form of memorial. Where memorials are permitted they are usually presented in an orderly, standardized fashion, such as the rose bushes in grid iron row beds or memorial plaques and recordia tablets conforming to a uniform design and dimensions.<sup>5</sup> However, it must also be pointed out that many mid 20th century cemeteries operate in a similar manner although with greater degrees of regulation. Whilst the constraint on service time is not so important due to less demand for burial, the adoption of the lawn grave system with a headstone only at the foot of the grave produces a neatly organized arrangement of memorials conforming to a pre-determined specification of colour, dimension and material. It is an environment where,

"...in the grid iron pattern of tarmac paths and in the gleaming rows of monuments placed back to back...functionalism dominates..." (Meller 1994: 213).

Clegg (1989: 15) argues that such arrangements do little to meet the needs of the bereaved.

Whilst the lawn grave concept managed to expunge the former Victorian grave "class" system, the uniformity apparent in the cemeteries established since the 1930s bears close resemblance to the developing housing estates of the expanding suburbs. However, it is worthy of note that in the proposals for the same developments little

provision was ever made for cemetery space, perhaps indicating the prevailing unawareness to cater also for the needs of the dead (Jackson 1991).

Fourthly, crematoria are increasingly becoming managed as self-sufficient and cost-effective operations without being a burden on the rates; cemeteries are similarly put out to tender for administration, grave digging and ground maintenance or in some cases sold (Dunk and Rugg 1994: 9). In more recent years the Private Finance Initiative has encouraged local authorities to dispose of their crematoria to the private sector (Voytal 1996). Time is a key feature in all operations and fines are levied for late or over-running funerals. Clearly finance is a major factor in the management of disposal. However, the level of control that is now present has created a situation where the bereaved merely attend funerals. A large number of the tasks which have to be completed are performed by the funeral director and other formal organizations acting as experts.

### Cremation, rationalization and the funeral director

Whilst the analysis reveals that in the early stages of its development cremation posed a threat to the funeral industry in terms of income, its subsequent increase has coincided with the rationalization of service which has developed from the centralized management of funerals. In this section the combined effects of two areas of change caused through cremation are examined - coffins and transportation.

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<sup>5</sup> Wood, leather or stone tablets on which an inscription is cut.

## Cremation and coffins

The rationale for disposal by cremation was efficiency and hygiene. From the undertaker, however, cremation required a new style of coffin in contrast to the sturdy receptacles provided for burial. The cremation coffin was simply viewed as convenient for transportation - coffinless cremation has never been an option due to the effects of decomposition and the impracticality of introducing the body into a hot cremator. Cremation also alleviated the need for coffins to be regarded as a source of security or of decoration.

Fenner (1985) states that for the first cremation at Woking the body covered with a black cloth had actually been removed from a coffin, and a reviewer of the fourth cremation taking place in England on the 12 March 1886 records that cremation of a twenty-two-year-old man in an elm coffin took 2 hours, but "...less if in pine or wickerwork".<sup>6</sup> Thus it can be seen that cremation can be efficiently achieved if barriers between the body and the flame are minimal.

The private organizations that managed the crematoria in England until the first decade issued restrictions on the type of wood to be used in the construction of cremation coffins, for example Golders Green:

"The coffin should be made of some readily combustible wood such as Cotton Wood, American White Wood, Canadian Elm, or Thin Pine.



English Elm is prohibited. Oak may be used, though it is not recommended, and then the boards should be as thin as possible and well seasoned and dry....There is no objection to the coffin being polished and having the usual furniture but the handles and breastplate should be so fixed as to be easily removed. Should the body be enclosed in a shell and outer case, and the latter is not intended to be consumed, it must not remain at the crematorium, but be taken away on the same day that the cremation takes place."<sup>7</sup>

Of particular note is that elaborate outer coffins were permitted which together with the metal handles and nameplate had to be removed before cremation. From these regulations it is easy to detect how the popular myths such as the bodies being removed from the coffin or handles being sold back to the funeral director emerged (see Davies 1995).<sup>8</sup> However, it would be fair to say that clients were probably aware that such coffin were used on a loan basis.

The effects of cremation on the funeral director in terms of the coffin have been considerable as the following section discusses. The restrictions on the type of coffin coupled with the rationalist approach towards cremation by the minority that chose this mode of disposal in the formative years had the effect of reducing the possible

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<sup>6</sup> The Undertakers' Journal (1886) 17 March p17

<sup>7</sup> Cremation in London (c.1904) Dottridge Brothers (Authors collection)

<sup>8</sup> Jupp (1990: 19) refers to this in the context of the Aberdeen case (1942).

income for undertakers through restricting the sales of a higher quality coffin. Undertakers introduced plain coffins often covered in appropriate coloured cloth. In the London area a basic wooden coffin "shell" covered in purple or maroon coloured cloth could be found up until about the early 1980s when it was replaced by coffins less labour-intensive in their preparation. Metal handles were replaced by ornamental diamond shaped blocks of wood with coloured fabric tassels.

Whilst the cloth covered coffins were often at the commencement point of the funeral director's range in terms of price and style, cremation did not altogether totally preclude the purchase of a more sturdy or elaborate coffin. Although crematoria issued guidelines there was no strict enforcement and solid coffins could be cremated. However, as veneered chipboard became available in an ever increasing array of finishes including panelled sides, funeral directors had the ability to market a full range of presentable coffins that coincided with the regulations and gave the opportunity for an increased margin of profit.

The use of solid timber - usually oak and elm - has been the industry standard for many years, particularly the latter on account of its ease of supply, bendability and waterproof characteristics. However, as a valuable commodity wood has become increasingly expensive. Restrictions on the use of timber for coffins can be detected during both WWI and WWII.<sup>9</sup> However, in the 1960s and 1970s the Dutch elm disease - *phloem*

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<sup>9</sup>"Brief Outline of the History and Objects of the NAFD" NAFD Yearbook and Directory (1963) p11-15

*necrosis* - ravaged the domestic market. The cost of elm became prohibitive and as the most commonly utilized wood the industry was forced to seek other materials for use in the construction of coffins in addition to timbers from abroad.

By this time chipboard became to be recognized as an acceptable and economic alternative to solid wood and oak or elm veneered coffins were accepted industry-wide. Wood foil was then developed to be finally superseded by plastic laminates in the 1970s.

Chipboard coffins were only available through manufacturers and certainly by the 1960s in the light of increasing labour costs many firms switched to mass produced coffins. However, in the rural areas manual coffin production continued.

Like preservation of the body, the emerging organizational concept of the centralized management of funerals - which will be discussed more fully at a later stage - played a key part in encouraging the adoption of mass production coffins by funeral directors as bulk deliveries could be made to one location thus achieving economies of scale and labour savings. Empty coffin shells would then be fitted and lined in one workshop. The same economic principle could be applied to coffin furnishings. Following embalming, the body would be encoffined and then transported to the branch office. Thus each office as an independent unit was replaced by facilities at the centralized repository. However, as chapter 5 will indicate recent developments show that some



organizations now purchase their coffin stock ready fitted with handles and lined thus further reducing the labour time spent on coffin preparation.

As outlined above, in the early part of this century it is likely that undertakers were suspicious of cremation as it had the potential for reducing expenditure on the coffin and, accordingly, profits. However, through mass production and the use of wood-substitutes such as chipboard, an enhanced range of coffins could be offered. Less expensive fittings of "brassed" plastic replaced the majority of metal handles and nameplates. One-piece liners negated the necessity for sealing materials in the interior of the coffin.

Through the preference of cremation the range of coffins and caskets that most funeral directors offer are now inter-changeable - equally suitable for burial or cremation. In recent years environmental concerns considering smoke emission and the use of wood products for cremation have prompted the industry to reconsider the type of coffins supplied. Cardboard coffins have appeared in addition to environmentally friendly timbers, such as tulip wood. These issues will be discussed more fully in the concluding chapter.

### Cremation and transport

During this century the major change in the mode of transportation in general terms has been from animate to motor power. For the funeral industry the replacement of

horse-drawn vehicles by the motor hearse and limousine is a transformation with important consequences. Essentially it gave undertakers the ability to increase the quantity of work to be completed in one day. As the analysis below discussed, cremation contributed to this development.

In rural areas the mode of transport around 1900 would invariably be restricted to a wheel-bier.<sup>10</sup> However, in 1910 the Undertakers' Journal stated;

"The motor is entering so much into our daily life that it was inevitable that it should be eventually called in to serve the undertaker in his dealings with the dead".<sup>11</sup>

Although Reuben Thompson of Sheffield is credited with being the first to use a motor hearse in 1900, (which incidentally was predominantly utilised for distance deliveries, not funerals) it was not until the end of the first decade of this century that the trade press regularly documented the use of this mode of transport (Litten 1991: 40).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> From the cover advertisement of trade periodicals the Undertakers' Journal such devices were still obtainable and continued to be utilized well into this century. For example, see Undertakers' Journal cover VolXXII No5 May 15 1907

<sup>11</sup> Undertakers' Journal January 15 1910 p10

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that at the turn of the century the railway system was regularly used to transport coffins. Distance often prevented the economic use of the horse and records show the frequent and extensive use of the railways by undertakers. Until Golders Green Crematorium was opened in 1902, Londoners desiring cremation were taken by rail to Woking on funeral trains running from the premises of the London

Carriage masters in particularly the urban areas quickly saw the potential of possessing a motorised fleet. London firms such as JH Kenyon and WS Bond proudly advertised their fleet of motor hearses and landaulettes in the local and trade press from the 1920s. The manufacture of the fleet was frequently mentioned, such as Leyland, Rolls-Royce, Austin and Armstrong-Siddeley, effectively becoming a symbol of identity for the undertaker. Just as the animate resources were hired to undertakers at rates set by the London Funeral Carriage Proprietors' Association so too were the motor vehicles.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that there appeared to be a transition period during which time the animate and motor power were both available for funerals. West (1988) mentions the use of the motor vehicles as an alternative to horse power during the approximate period 1915 to 1945. West (1988: 111) and Litten (1991: 142) both see WWII as the turning point in the retention of both forms of transport. Taylor (1983: 279) reports that by 1949 only three undertakers in London possessed horses, but were considering selling them. The cost of maintaining to a high standard a stable with black Belgian studs was a costly exercise. Full-time labour was required to clean as well as drive the hearses and carriages.<sup>14</sup>

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Necropolis Company's station at Waterloo built to serve the Company's vast cemetery at Brookwood (Clarke 1988). See Curl (1986b) in respect of a second railway from Belle Isle to the Great Northern Cemetery.

<sup>13</sup> Undertakers' Journal October 1916 p27

<sup>14</sup> A draft history of JH Kenyon (nd authors collection) hints at the long hours worked by coachmen.



The departure of the horse-drawn hearse from the funeral scene by about 1950 appears to be nationwide. Not only had the reliability of motorised transport increased, but with the widespread escalation of car-ownership in the subsequent years, animate power as a method of transport was out-moded, particularly in the urban areas. Habenstein and Lamers (1963: 565) note that by replacing the horse-drawn hearse with the streamlined fleet fewer heads turned when the cortège passed.

As cremation gradually replaced burial, opportunities for organizations acquiring motorised transport opened the way for economies to be achieved. From the 1960s funerals have increasingly been conducted solely in the crematorium chapel and not at a church. In such circumstances the hearse would be released as soon as the coffin had been carried into the chapel and the floral tributes off-loaded. Thus the hearse was available to be engaged on another funeral. In addition, whilst the journey to the place of disposal would be taken at an appropriate pace, the return journey would not be so restricted thus further reducing the time per funeral. This contrasts to burial where the service took place in the cemetery chapel prior to interment. Only after the coffin had been carried out of the chapel and the service concluded at the graveside would the vehicles be released. Thus where cremation was concerned, vehicles could be more effectively utilised and funerals that would otherwise be delayed as a result of time restrictions could be undertaken sooner. Coupled with this aspect of the marked preference towards cremation, more importantly is the increase in the number of available crematoria in urban areas. The 1950s witnessed the opening of a succession of crematoria particularly in expanding suburban areas, such as south London, thus facilitating the number of locations as well as the available times for funerals. The

fleeting of funerals thereby became easier. Whereas a horse-drawn hearse could undertake a maximum of two funerals in a day, a motor hearse owned by a firm situated near a crematorium could frequently cope with four, possibly five funerals without too much difficulty.

Just as crematoria operate to planned "dove-tailed" schedules so too do funeral directors vehicles where fleets are allocated to a series of funerals that "workover" from one to another. As funerals have become increasingly predictable through the length of a service becoming standardized, greater utilization of resources has resulted. Rationalization within the funeral director's operations extends further to staff and policies as chapter 4 details.

The second factor was that all staff conveyed with the funeral could be accommodated in the hearse, thus alleviating the need for a separate form of transport. Under union agreements in force until the 1940s, strict demarcation between driving and bearing staff were in operation and sufficient bearers had to be conveyed to the cemetery or crematorium without utilising the drivers for this activity. Such models of hearse, for example the "Bearer" hearse permitted the conveyance of four bearers and the conductor (Polson and Marshall 1975: 375). In due time, with the relaxing of such task specialization further savings in human resource could be realised. However, further economies were achieved through using the chapel staff employed at the crematorium on a casual basis for coffin bearing duties.

In addition to the economies achieved through increased utilization of capital-intensive resources, the shift in the place of reposition of the body can be identified as a major contributor to the funeral directors' ability to gain additional operational economies.

### 3) Care of the deceased

The body is the object around which the whole of the funeral is centered. For this reason it can be regarded as a source of power. For the funeral director, however, responsibility towards the deceased can be regarded as a contemporary function as around 1900 contact with the body by the undertaker was minimal. Custody and care was provided by the family and community. However, with changing requirements the funeral director has acquired these duties thereby shifting the locus of control. In the following section changes that have occurred are examined from the perspective of the funeral director. In particular, attention is given to the adoption of embalming, as the latter can be identified as a significant contributor to professionalization of the occupation.

### Laying-out

As had been the case for previous centuries it was the female engaged to lay-out the body who had the most physical propinquity with the corpse. To the undertaker/funeral director contact with the dead is a relatively new activity.



The gendered role of laying-out has recently received considerable attention by Chamberlain and Richardson (1983), Roberts (1989) and Adams (1993). Ainsworth-Smith and Speck (1982: 75) points to the fact that women attended to the body of Jesus in the tomb. It was the laying out woman who was present and involved in both the important rites of passage of life: birth and death - duties that at times coincided; for example death during childbirth. Laying-out was an informal system of neighbourhood care particularly in working-class areas. Reward was usually non-financial.

Laying out involved thoroughly washing the body and dressing it in clean night-clothes. Alternatively the undertaker might supply a shroud or robe. Roberts (1989: 194) notes that these women observed such rituals as placing pennies on the eyes of the deceased - one of the same pennies that was placed on the navel of new born babies.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the windows were opened to let out odours in addition to the deceased's spirit (Adams 1993: 159).<sup>16</sup>

Through their contact with the newly bereaved, Naylor notes that these women were in a position to "...connect undertakers with their source of revenue" (1989: 55). Adams (1993: 161) points to the fact that it was the same individual who made a further contribution to the post-death arrangements by additionally preparing the funeral tea.

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<sup>15</sup> This was a practice decried when funeral directors assumed the responsibility of care - presumably as "unprofessional". (See MFD 1988 Ch 5 p3)

<sup>16</sup> A ritual confirmed to the writer by the owner of a nursing home in East Kent (October (1994)).

Both Chamberlain and Richardson (1983) and Adams (1993) review the circumstances surrounding the decline of the layer-out. Whilst the Midwives Act 1902 sought to provide registration and consequent regulation particularly for childbirth, the duty of laying-out continued until the years of WWII. However, the establishment of the National Health Service in the post-war years transferred care of the dying to the institution. Adams (1993: 164) notes that for reasons of the unpleasant effect of putrefaction many were only too glad to assign the responsibility of care and shelter to the undertaker.

Whilst laying out gave the corpse a degree of dignity through presentation it did not - nor was it intended to - retard decomposition. In fact it appears that decomposition was an accepted - but certainly not welcomed - eventuality over which there was no control. It is plausible that decomposition could be regarded as confirmation of death. Curl (1972: 178) notes that the fear of premature burial was still a real concern until the early part of this century.

It does not appear that these women were contaminated by their encounters with the body. Unlike the male counterparts who were soon to acquire the task (see chapter 6), the laying out women were honoured (Chamberlain and Richardson 1983: 39) and respected by the community. Through occurring in the community death appeared not to be surrounded by either mystique or isolation. This appears to be in contrast to the manner in which this task is viewed by the professional hospital nurse (Blauner 1966: 385).

## Change in the place of reposition for the dead

As the body remained at home during the interval between death and disposal few undertakers possessed chapels of rest in the early part of the century. Although there is evidence to show that certainly in the urban areas some firms possessed viewing and storage facilities, the vast majority made no provision. In 1900, the Coroner in South London ruled that undertakers' premises were unsuitable for the retention of bodies.<sup>17</sup> The only alternative accommodation was in a public mortuary or possibly a hospital. However, such places were deprecated by the public;

"The thought that the bodies of friends and relations should be taken to a mortuary suggests to the average mind an indignity, a social degradation. The mortuary is regarded as especially provided by the State for the bodies of unfortunate outcasts picked up from the gutter, or dragged from the river, or at the best, as a place where the suicide or a person meeting with some dreadful accident is impounded till a jury can be called together for an inquest. We associate it mentally with the prison and the workhouse" (Puckle 1926: 28).

Puckle argued that the State should compulsorily provide accommodation and indirectly through the Coroner's system it did. Coincidentally, the enactment of the Coroners (Amendment) Act 1926 was essentially designed to increase the accuracy of

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<sup>17</sup> South London Press Feb 15 1902 p3



the certification of the cause of death. Coupled with the Births and Deaths Registration Act of the same year the number of post-mortem examinations (without inquest) held by a coroner increased and thus an escalation in the building and use of public mortuaries can be found (Broderick 1966: 117). Cottridge confirmed the public distaste towards mortuaries and commented that:

"Undertakers are being obliged, increasingly, to make provision on their own premises for the custody of the bodies awaiting burial. Some of them with no special accommodation available actually receive bodies for a day or two in their offices and workshops. In other cases special buildings or apartments have been equipped as mortuary chapels or solely as "utility" reception rooms" (1933: 133).

There is evidence to show that from about 1916 undertakers in London provided accommodation. A number of advertisements state that they have "Private mortuaries" or "Private Mortuary Chapels".<sup>18</sup> However, it was not until the 1930s that a few purpose built funeral homes could be found providing en suite chapels and facilities. The trade journals of the decade frequently carried feature articles with photographs of newly ordered premises containing chapels.<sup>19</sup> In an article in The Times of 1937 a

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<sup>18</sup>See JH Kenyon's advertisement in a parish magazine of 1916. Also EB Ashton in Kelly's Directory (1920)

<sup>19</sup> For examples see The National Funeral Director February 1938 p193 (Dodgsons' of Leeds); The Undertakers' and Funeral Directors' Journal October 1937 p339 (Nodes of Crouch End, London); The Undertakers' and Funeral Directors' Journal November 1937 p375 (Sanders of Richmond)

correspondent reviewing the opening of a new funeral home commented that about 50% of the dead now die in hospital (this figure is understood to be inaccurate).<sup>20</sup>

At the opening of a chapel in Leeds the reviewer stated:

"Customs die hard, and the public of the district have not looked favourably on mortuaries or mortuary chapels and the public mortuary facilities in the city leave much to be desired, but this new chapel of rest has been in almost continuous use since its completion, and this is surely a definite indication that the firm have provided something that has made a sure and speedy appeal, also something that is proving of great utility to a community that has not hitherto found beauty and solace in the public accommodation provided."<sup>21</sup>

It should also be noted that crematoria constructed at the same time also maintained chapels of rest where coffins could be taken prior to the cremation. Facilities existed at South London and Mortlake which opened in 1936 and 1939 respectively.

The transition to the non-familial environment of the funeral director's premises (despite the limited adoption of the Americanism "funeral home") was initially slow.

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<sup>20</sup> see The Times 17th August 1937 "Modern Funeral Practice: Aids to mourners' comforts"

<sup>21</sup> "The Need of Chapels of Rest" The National Funeral Director February 1938 p193

However, as time progressed the supply of the chapel of rest equated with the demand from the public, especially following WWII.

Following the occurrence of death in a hospital, the body was not returned home but remained - to a degree hidden - elsewhere. There does, however, appear to be regional variations in respect of this matter (See Roberts 1989: 197 in respect of Lancashire). Thus with no body in the house, friends, neighbours and children could not call to view the corpse, a deep rooted nationwide practice (Roberts 1971: 124). In this aspect death was no longer "public" and consequently the communal support vanished as no tangible reason existed to call at the house to express sympathy and participate in a ritual. By the end of the 1960s viewing at the funeral director's premises became the accepted procedure and a number of reasons can be identified in respect of the preference towards using these facilities.

Firstly, the need for bodies to be accommodated other than in the home can be seen to reflect changes that has occurred in the accommodation that was gradually being provided. Post-war recovery in the 1950s saw the building of new styles of residential accommodation. Smaller houses of open plan designs as well as flats reached by comparatively narrow staircases and passenger lifts prevented coffins being accommodated. The house was no longer compartmentalised with a "best" room set aside for the reception of a coffin (Jupp 1993).

Secondly, the shift from the family caring for the elderly to the responsibility of paid professionals has witnessed an extensive expansion in local authority and private sector



nursing care facilities and correspondingly has contributed to the need for an alternative place of accommodation of the dead. The changing economic situation has resulted in relocation, thus necessitating formal care of the elderly in exclusive residences. Paying or contributing towards the cost of home fees often necessitates the sale of property. Such developments have removed any suitable accommodation for the coffin to rest. Similarly, the consequence of such an action has been to remove an identifiable location from which to commence the funeral cortège. It was once a frequent spectacle in the street, but the residence is now by-passed and instructions from the immediate family increasingly direct mourners to meet the hearse at the crematorium.

Thirdly, throughout contemporary society there has been a growing tendency to employ expert specialists and professionals to undertake tasks previously in the domain of the family or community. Whereas the female members of the community undertook the task of laying out, it is interesting to note that Roberts discovered an increasing desire for privacy and a "...change in neighbourhood relationships..." (Roberts 1989: 197) during the century which led to people abandoning the services of this gendered responsibility (see also Walter 1994: 20).

The decision to utilize the services of an undertaker also mirrored the increasingly prevailing notion of the body as a source of pollution and contamination. The availability of mortuary accommodation at the funeral director's meant that this problem was "out of sight and out of mind".

In addition to the chapel of rest some funeral directors also provided a service chapel where funeral ceremonies could be conducted. Although not of the proportions of those built in the USA, the intended function was identical. However, as Naylor (1989) notes, there has been considerable opposition by the clergy to such facilities being provided and controlled by funeral directors as they take the funeral away from the existing ecclesiastical environment presided over by the church. Such an argument is itself curious as cemetery chapels have for many years created such a situation, as have the even more municipal environment of crematoria chapels. In the wake of the noted increase in non-religious funerals it is likely that funeral directors' service chapels will be of importance in the future.

The duty of care and responsibility that the funeral director now has towards the body can be identified as the final stage in a three-fold scheme of distancing between the living and the dead as outlined in chapter 2. Just as control of the dying process has shifted to the medical profession so too has control of the body for the funeral director when death occurs. From the hospital ward it is surreptitiously transferred from the ward to the mortuary where the body remains until the next functionary in the procedural chain - the funeral director - arrives to collect it (Sudnow 1967). To the funeral director the body is regarded as a source of power (Howarth 1992) and thus of control. Essentially it represents the *raison d'être* of his existence for without it no funeral can take place. However, through transferring possession of the body to this functionary control is increased but consequently access is diminished. Like the bureaucratic system that Awoonor-Renner (1993: 271) encountered in the setting of the hospital an appointment must be made before calling at the funeral director's

premises to view a body.

### Custody and Preservation

The relocation of the body to the funeral director's mortuary shifted the problem of body storage prior to the funeral. From the perspective of the funeral director, however, it has stimulated the introduction of techniques of preservation in addition to increased control.

Although accounts of funeral ritual in the early part of this century cite attempts to control the unpleasantness of putrefaction, they were largely ineffectual. West mentions use of a

"...pail of carbolic disinfectant placed under the coffin or a saucer of sliced onions laid on the table" (1988: 113).

Gore cites the use of a saucer of ammonia under the coffin and "...a sort of candle thing that burnt" (1993: 130). The pages of trade periodicals published around 1900 advertise items such as "Disinfecting Cones" and "Antiseptic lozenges".<sup>22</sup> In addition, funeral furnishing manufacturers offered "sanitary coffins" - an air and water-tight coffin and shell.

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<sup>22</sup> Undertakers' Journal Dottridge Brothers advertisement 1904



Although Litten (1991: 54) points to the 1890s as the starting point of embalming in the UK, it was not until the year 1900 when a systematic attempt to introduce arterial embalming into this country occurred through the invitation of Dottridge Brothers and the BIU to invite an American embalming "Professor" to London to give undertakers a basic instruction in preservation techniques.<sup>23</sup> However, despite the prominent position of embalming in the trade press the amount of embalming practised in the UK until the 1940s was limited and Parsons (1995a) detects a number of reasons for this; opposition by the medical profession; the cost of the process; the time constraints of the limited number of embalmers; the lack of suitable facilities meant that embalming took place at home, and the sceptical attitude of the undertaking trade. With delays uncommon especially in rural areas and a reasonably steady climate in Britain, a case of "out of sight, out of mind" by the trade can be detected. It is perhaps significant to note that many of the undertakers presenting themselves for embalming training were from urban areas where delays in arranging funerals tended to be encountered.

### Embalming progress

During the 1930s (and to some extent prior to this date) it was clear from editorials and articles in the trade journals that the industry was anxious to elevate its status in the eyes of the public. Whilst registration was an objective of the British Undertakers' Association (BUA but shortly to become the National Association of Funeral Directors

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<sup>23</sup>See Parsons (1995a) for a full account of the early stages of arterial embalming in this country.

(NAFD)), the lack of success already encountered prompted members of the trade to consider the scientific process of embalming as a key to progress and thus professional status. Whilst the British Embalmers' Society had been established before the BUA, following the merger the united organization could in theory promote a consolidated front when presenting the benefits of embalming. It may well be the case that the inspiration for progress was drawn from the headway encountered by funeral service in America (Habenstein and Lamers 1995). Huntington and Metcalf (1979: 191) identify that the adoption of embalming strengthened funeral directing in the United States two ways. Firstly, a system of state licensing,

"...designed...no doubt to protect the public from charlatans, [which thus] created a controlling professional *élite*" (Huntington and Metcalf 1979: 191).

The second reason they advance is that the apparatus required for embalming necessitated the removal of the deceased to the funeral director's mortuary. Both aspects essentially afforded the funeral director greater control over the body. However, it is likely that a more pragmatic rationale for its advancement in America would be climatic variation. For British funeral directors, however, with society's preference to retain the body at home coupled with the general apathy to change, the industry could only anticipate the day when greater control of the body could be achieved.

However, whilst these organizations sought to promote embalming internally, changes in society were taking place that began to necessitate a more thorough and technically-based approach towards care for the body. It is the post-war years that can be seen as the turning point in the increase in the practice of modern arterial embalming.

Routine embalming by funeral directors started in the 1950s - an era which showed a simultaneous positive relationship in the funeral director's custody of the body. In the 1960s, Habenstein and Lamers commented that embalming in the UK is now being practised "...far more than at any time in the past" (1963: 560).

They also cite the number of particularly large funeral firms employing full-time embalmers, the increase in trade embalmers and the number of dual qualified embalmer/funeral directors (Habenstein and Lamers 1963: 560). Some five years later Pine amongst others quotes from a source that "...some firms embalm up to 80-90% of the dead they handle" (1969: 57) - a figure confirmed in 1966 as appertaining to the London area by Broderick in addition to the estimate of over 50% on a nationwide basis (1966: 329).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In 1967, the NAFD recorded a national average of 52% of bodies embalmed ("Analysis of Members' Answers to the Questionnaire: What the public wants (for 1967)" The Funeral Director September p502-504). Regional differences are striking; in the London area 72% is recorded, falling to 12% in Scotland and 8% in the Western Counties. Naylor details that by the 1980s,

"...25% or 161,500 cases were being embalmed per annum, although the survey figures were not fully representative - with only a 29% return rate" (1989: 59).



Although the precise extent of embalming in this country today is unknown - even the British Institute of Embalmers cannot provide statistics - there are a number of indicators to suggest that its application is widespread.<sup>25</sup> The strength of the British Institute of Embalmers with its constant flow of students (currently 1230 subscribing members and 430 students)<sup>26</sup>, at least ten embalming schools, three fluid and instruments suppliers all suggest its reasonably widespread employment. In addition, the large firms, such as SCI (perhaps the American influence), the Co-ops and many medium size organizations advocate its practice. With such indicators as to the practice of embalming it is surprising that in a recent text, Davies (1996) asserts that embalming is virtually unheard of in this country.

It is significant that the growth of embalming stems from a period when greater responsibility for the body by the undertaker was being assumed. Whilst custody did not automatically mean embalming would be carried out, it is argued here that supply of embalming was in the interests of funeral director in contrast to the service being demanded by the bereaved.

Evidence that embalming was carried out only relatively infrequently before the 1950s suggests that society was unaware of its existence and objectives, therefore unlikely to demand its application. However, it also suggests that funeral directors were not promoting the availability of the service. Certainly advocates of embalming had

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<sup>25</sup>Only one unsubstantiated reference can be found to indicate the current extent of embalming. Pym (1990: 49) states "...in most parts of the UK the practice is approaching 90%...".

difficulties advancing it within the trade, perhaps due to the fact that home was still the place of reposition although there is evidence to indicate that progressive firms tended to embalm cases at home.

Although evidence exists to show that the science was brought to the attention of the public by the success of the embalming of Lenin some years earlier in 1924 and that of Eva Peron in 1952 (Johnson 1987), thus demonstrating the existence and efficacy of long-term preservation techniques, it is unfortunate that arterial embalming was then as it often is now confused with mummification (Litten 1991: 33).

The limited public awareness of the extent of embalming is confirmed by Gorer following his interviews with the bereaved in the early 1960s;

"...as far as I can discover, this [embalming] is still an exceptional practice in Britain" (1965: 45).

This belief could stem from the fact that the word embalming has been treated with great ambiguity by the industry. As arterial embalming is perhaps the most sensitive subject that a funeral director can discuss with the client, the deficiency of a suitable word or phrase to adequately describe it is probably the basis of the confusion. Phrases such as "sanitary or temporary preservation of the remains" are utilized by funeral directors along with terms increasingly evasive, such as "care and preparation of the body", "hygienic treatment" and "necessary care and preparation of the body". The

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<sup>26</sup> The Embalmer Vol38 No 3 Summer 1995 p12

reference to hygiene coincides with 20th century attitudes towards the body. As a source of contamination the body is rendered in a sanitary condition following embalming. From the perspective of a rite of passage, the embalming process can be viewed as an interim transitional period, after which it re-emerges for viewing.

There is, however, one area to which the actual demand for embalming can be directly attributed; the repatriation of human remains. The vast majority of airlines have a requirement that arterial embalming be carried out to minimize the risk of problems occurring due to climatic and atmospheric changes during transit. Consular regulations of many countries also insist on embalming. The actual increase in repatriations can be viewed from two perspectives. Firstly, following the expansion and acquired reputation of excellence of both the private and public medical sector many non-UK residents travel particularly to London for treatment. Should death occur, repatriation would often be required. Secondly, the increase in the number of often first generation immigrants with families both living and dying in the UK, but with familial roots and possibly a grave space in their country of origin have similarly demanded repatriation services from funeral directors. This period has witnessed the emergence of specialist repatriation organizations - such as Kenyon Air Transportation and Rowland Brothers - offering a "shipping" service to funeral directors.

From a more supply-sided perspective, however, it is more likely that funeral directors have been responsible for the increase in embalming for the following reasons:



Firstly, it is necessary to consider embalming in comparison to alternative methods of cadaver preservation. The first alternative was provided by developments in refrigeration. However, refrigeration only provides preservation in a chilled atmosphere and before viewing some superficial presentation must be executed on the features of the deceased. Once viewed bodies must invariably be returned to a chilled environment. The installation of a refrigeration plant - although of long-term value - involves considerable capital expenditure possibly through restructuring of premises in addition to on-going maintenance. The second method was dry ice - frozen blocks of carbon dioxide. In the mid 1930s Dottridge Brothers marketed "Drikold" (developed by ICI); similar preparations such as "Cardice" can be seen in the trade press and NAFD Yearbooks of the 1940s. Available in blocks of CO<sub>2</sub> it had a temperature of 110°F below zero and could be used to freeze the abdomen or other parts of the body. However, it evaporated and a block measuring 7" by 14" and weighing 25lbs would have to be replaced within 24 hours. As with refrigeration, the application of dry ice only arrested decomposition, again leaving presentational aspects of the deceased to the funeral director. In contrast to both methods, the process of embalming preserved the body whilst in the completion of the task the embalmer also attended to the presentation of features.

Secondly, it is likely that the rapid growth in cremation in the post-war years generated problems in terms of delay between death and disposal. In the post-war period when preference for cremation increased significantly building restrictions were in force constraining of the number of service times available at the existing crematoria. It was not until the end of the deadlock in 1951 when the situation started to improve

(Prevette 1975: 73; Jupp 1993). Although it is difficult to substantiate, it could be stated that the problem was perhaps the greatest in urbanized areas where few crematoria existed. Certainly records suggest that this was not a problem in the south London area with a comparatively high number of crematoria.<sup>27</sup> Ten crematoria were in operation in the metropolitan areas up to 1938; a further three opened in 1939. However, it was not until the first post-war crematorium at Kingston was opened in 1952, followed by a further ten up to 1958, that the opportunity to utilize embalming during this period afforded both preservation and presentation of the body by the funeral director.

Thirdly, embalming could be offered or advised as an additional service to the client thereby generating extra revenue for the funeral director. Although as noted above the cost in the early days was prohibitive, the increasing demand for embalming was met with a supply of "trade embalmers" offering a free-lance embalming service to funeral directors on a contractual basis. The Lear Embalming Service served urbanized London and the home counties since the late 1940s, proudly advertising the steady increase in yearly figures in the trade journals, especially during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>28</sup> Using such services meant that the funeral director did not have to train as an embalmer or employ a full-time member of staff. It is worthy of note that two embalming schools

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<sup>27</sup>Examination of a number of funeral directors records in South London does not indicate that the interval between death and cremation was any longer than that experienced today. Even at 1900 Parsons (1995a) found that this interval (death and burial - not cremation) was about 5 days in the urban area.

<sup>28</sup> The National Funeral Director February 1950 p372. In 1949 Lear Embalming Service embalmed 6060 cases - an increase of 798 over the previous year. An examination of funeral directors records in the south London area for the 1940s



emerged in 1946 - the Dottridge School of Embalming and Funeral Hygiene (recognised by the Ministry of Labour as a training establishment) and the Lear School of Embalming - with others being established in the 1950s, thus providing a steady supply of trained embalmers.<sup>29</sup> This confirms the evidence of West (1988: 114) when he notes that the NAFD embarked upon a extensive educational programme in post WWII years to encourage funeral directors to take a more professional view of the need for thorough sanitation. With an increasing number of practitioners in the field and as demand grew, the cost of embalming was subject to the advantages of price/supply competition. As at the time a certain amount of embalming was undertaken at home, this also prevented the funeral director from the costly necessity of maintaining a fully-equipped embalming theatre. Many funeral directors now include embalming as part of their portfolio of services.

Fourthly, in conjunction with the additional responsibility it is likely that client expectations have increased as the funeral director is employed in the capacity of a funerary expert and specialist service provider. Whereas in the period when the body rested at home under familial care decomposition was accepted as uncontrollable and inevitable, by entrusting it to a specialist the level of expectation increased. When clients view the body the expectation is that it will be presented decently without any leakage or odour. Although the bereaved are most unlikely to know exactly what "care of the body" precisely entails, it is assumed that techniques will be exercised to prevent

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indicates that embalming was charged to the client from £3 3s to £5 5s.

<sup>29</sup> The National Funeral Director January 1950 p319. The Lear School of Embalming is known today as the Lear College of Mortuary Science.



the body being presented in an insanitary condition. Thus a standard of presentation and preservation is presumed by the client when the funeral director is entrusted to "take care of everything".

It is also interesting to note that the responsibility of care towards the body was becoming binding upon funeral directors who acquired custody of the body. As early as 1935 Lear brought to the attention of fellow funeral directors the position concerning a body that decomposed causing illness, whilst in the care of the funeral director:

"The magistrate held that the funeral director was responsible for the condition of a body up to the time of burial" (1935: 99).

From this precedent it can be seen that if the funeral director offered care for the dead, it was his responsibility to maintain the body in a sanitary condition.

Fifthly, perhaps the most important factor from the perspective of organizational change was that embalming contributed towards the centralized management and control of funerals. As a number of organizations expanded in the period around the 1960s all resources became centralized including mortuary facilities. Following the acquisition or development of a branch office all resources would be supplied by the operational centre, thus relieving the need for both refrigeration, mortuary facilities and an embalmer at each unit. Some firms calculated that sufficient work existed for employing a full-time embalmer; others believed that economies of scale could be achieved by negotiating volume-rated embalming with contractors who would only

embalm in one location. By providing embalming within the scope of centralization bodies could be transferred to the branch offices without fear of decomposition thereby reducing refrigeration and storage capacity at the head office.

The control of capital-intensive resources assisted significantly in fulfilling the profit orientation of the large organizations.

Embalming also contributed to the health and safety of the employee. Certainly from the perspective of the staff, Crichton (1976: 107) rightly points out embalmed bodies are more hygienic for funeral service employees to handle.

Sixthly, embalming must also be considered in the context of the professionalization of the funeral director. Whilst chapter 6 will consider the contribution made by embalming towards the process, it is clear that the industry placed great emphasis on its practitioners to possess sanitary knowledge and exercise competence. Howarth notes that

"...the pseudo scientific nature of the work such as embalming forms the basis for the industry's claim to professional respectability..." (1993a: 234).

Whilst the craft of embalming gave some funeral directors a specialist knowledge base, more importantly it gave funeral directors the opportunity to distance themselves from the source of stigma - the body.

It is this rationalization that has created a situation where funeral performance in the late 20th century has almost become "McDonaldized" (Ritzer 1993). The four characteristics of formal rationality - predictability, efficiency, calculability and control - all appear in a greater or lesser degree in funeral and disposal performance.

## Conclusion

Throughout this century a gradual shift has occurred in the management of death as tasks once undertaken by the family and community have been acquired by a paid specialist. As a result of urbanization, legislation, change in the place of death and greater preference for cremation, the role of the funeral director has changed to accommodate the impact of these developments. One of the most important changes is custody of the dead body which from the perspective of the funeral director has given the opportunity to adopt the craft of embalming.

However, it is argued in this chapter that as occupational responsibility has increased, the level of control of the overall funeral process by the funeral director has also escalated. As a result the funeral director has been able to centralize resource-intensive activities, such as care of the body and transportation, thus exploiting the opportunities of rationalization of the death and disposal system whilst also containing expenditure by achieving economies of scale.



## Chapter 4 - Organizational change in the funeral industry: an analysis since 1900

### Introduction

Change during the period 1900-1994 indicates that in terms of organizational structure and operational mode a transformation of the industry has occurred.

In organizational terms, it is the emergence of the management of funerals on a centralized basis that can be identified as the most strategic development encountered by the industry this century. As small family firms have faced increasing problems, specialist funeral organizations have sought to make acquisitions in recognition of the economies of scales gained through large scale operations as discussed in the previous chapter. During the last three decades considerable acquisitional activity has restructured the organizational composition of the industry. However, these developments must be considered in their true context as the independent firm still continues to dominate the industry in terms of percentage market share.

It is argued here that the large bureaucratic firm managing funerals on a centralized basis have few advantages - financial or otherwise - for the consumer. Although the large organizations claim that economies of scale are generated by such workings, it is argued here that any benefit is gained by the organization itself rather than by the bereaved. Furthermore, from a non-financial perspective it is argued that large-scale funeral operations give rise to a number of negative consequences for the bereaved and employees.

## The funeral industry 1900-1960

### The funeral industry - an organizational typology at 1900

In his assessment of the funeral industry during the nineteenth century, Litten (1991) identifies three types of undertaking organization in existence; coffin-making, undertaking and funeral furnishing;

“...coffin-maker did as the title suggests: he made coffins. He might have also performed funerals, but not necessarily so. The undertaker was a coffin maker and performer of funerals, whereas the funeral furnisher did not make coffins, but bought them in ready-made, dressed them, and in addition performed the funeral. This, then was the hierarchy of the trade” (Litten 1991: 26).

At the beginning of the twentieth century a similar typology can be applied to the industry as analysis from data, such as from Kelly's Post Office Directory for London depicts. Firstly, the dual-activity (or non-core) undertaker who supplied a coffin and arranged the timings of the funeral. This type of organization would hire the means of transportation from a carriage master. Demand of work was usually the decisive factor between full and part-time operation of this type of undertaker. From examination of Kelly's it appears that the departmental store could be classified in this manner as many were involved in the provision of a funeral service. The Army & Navy Co-operative Stores, Maples, Harrods and William Whiteley (all in central London) are examples not essentially of diversification into funerals, but fulfilment of the philosophy

of the departmental stores: providing for all aspects of life. An additional point signifies the role the stores played in providing mourning apparel. All these stores would have extensive clothing and drapery departments that could supply the necessary attire for the period of mourning (Taylor 1983: 191). However, these organizations sub-contracted resources from the third type of funeral firm outlined below. The involvement of departmental stores in undertaking appears to have ceased by the 1920s, although Harrods continued to offer this service through a sub-contracting arrangement with a Knightsbridge firm - which subsequently became part of JH Kenyon - until the early 1990s.

Secondly, the specialist or sole-activity undertaker existed whose work level was as such to warrant full-time employment in the occupation. His functions mirrored those of the non-core undertaker except that he may well have also possessed the animate transport and manpower instead of hiring from the third category.

Thirdly, the carriage master who would supply on a contractual basis to an undertaker lacking capital-intensive resources such as the hearse and carriages and manpower required for the funeral. The latter may also undertake funerals.

The above three classifications can be seen to coincide with the typology of firms advanced (albeit some years later) by Scase and Goffee (1987: 24). The non-core activity undertaker would invariably be self-employed, often relying on the unwaged assistance of his family. The specialist undertaker would be actively involved in the running of the business, usually employing others in a full-time (and possibly part-time)



capacity. The carriage master - possibly also an undertaker - could either be an owner-controller or an owner-director. Much would depend on the size of the organization in terms of actual resources, hence the almost exclusive managerial responsibilities assigned to the owner-controller and the hierarchial and delegatory nature of the second.

Although no accurate statistics exist, it is important to note that the vast majority of business organizations in operation during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were family owned and managed. That is to say, they may be regarded as "patrimonial" organizations (Kerr 1974). In respect of the funeral industry, as the analysis in Chapter 2 detailed, throughout history the family has contributed in differing ways to the disposal of the dead and when the occupation first emerged it was the patriarchal family that sought to provide the goods and services on a commercial basis. It is only during this century that the presence of the family has declined but has not, however, been replaced. As figures later presented in this chapter reveal, although concentration has had the effect of attempting to replacing the family in this occupation, such organizations are today still the dominant type in the industry. Such a situation therefore prompts an examination as to why a connection exists between the family and the occupation of undertaking.

Checkland (1964) notes that in the nineteenth century, trades such as building and distribution as well as craft-based, low-capital sectors tended to be founded by the working-classes. Due to the low social status possessed by the industry, undertaking can certainly be deemed part of this category. Whilst actually establishing an

undertaking firm involved comparatively little capital due to the sub-contracting to the carriage master, diversification into the trade especially if the core-occupation was carpentry related probably required even less initial finance.

Donnelley (1964: 97) identifies six characteristics as strengths of the family business; (i) the availability of otherwise unobtainable financial and management resources due to family sacrifices; (ii) important community and business relationships stemming from a respected name; (iii) a dedicated and loyal internal organization; (iv) an interested group, unified management-stock-holder group; (v) a sensitivity to social responsibility; (vi) continuity and integrity in management policies and corporate focus.

The following illustrates (i) and (v). Although the undertaker operating at the turn of the century would not have offered a 24 hour service (a significant characteristic of the industry today despite the institutionalization of death), due to the fact that bodies were retained at the place of death - usually family residence, in the early days it is likely that member of the undertakers' family would be used for duties in the stables or in the coffin workshop. The family would have been used during busy periods to supply additional support, especially with labour-intensive coffin making. Such flexibility and use of part-time resources is still apparent within the independent sector of the industry. Whilst it is likely that the male gender would have been employed, the female - the wife - of the proprietor would have provided a "collaborative and supportive" (Blood and Wolfe 1960: 91) role.

It is clear that personal demands made of those engaged in funeral service are reflected in skills such as sensitivity and tact acquired through family mentoring. In respect of social responsibility, West (1988: 115) notes the almost philanthropic nature of some undertakers.

It is particularly important to note that the craft-based enterprise of undertaking was suitable for succession to a male sibling. Personal contact with the community encountered by the nature of the occupation leads to the creation of customer loyalty. As recommendations from the satisfied client is the most effective form of advertising, future funerals will be forthcoming as long as appropriate contact is maintained. The weight of such continuity can be increased if a male sibling enters the family business and succeeds the paternal line into the firm. This lineage can frequently be seen in firms indicated by the appending of "& Sons" to the family trading name. Thus Donnelley (1964) identifies the value of the family name in the retention or attraction of new clients. In some cases especially where informal relationships are important,

"...the firm's identification with a family may have a direct bearing on its marketing activities" (Donnelley 1964: 99).

The maintenance of the trading name is of immeasurable value in work generation and one that will be discussed further at a later stage. In addition, continuity of the family name is also of considerable importance. In conjunction with this point it is important to note that accommodation for the owners of most craft related trades was at the place of work. Activities such as coffin construction would have taken place in



workshops adjoining accommodation and it is likely that siblings were exposed to the work of the undertaker at an early stage in their own lives. The duties involved in undertaking would be very "visible" (Dyer 1956) to any sibling. West (1988: 108) recalls how a child's coffin was brought into the living-room for completing (c1920). It is also likely that siblings would be given small tasks around the workshop.

The commercial transaction of funeral arrangements involves entrusting the body - an object "...sacred and profane, loved and loathed..." (Habenstein 1962: 243)- to functionaries willing to take responsibility of this rite of passage. As a funeral is a highly personal event affecting and involving the whole family, it is thus appropriate that a family dedicated to the provision of funeral service participates and interacts with the bereaved at this time.

### The Co-operative movement

During the course of the second decade of this century the Co-operative movement became involved in the provision of funerals. It is remarkable that despite the Co-operative funeral service already being a household name and today, operating as a collective of independent societies managing about one quarter of all the deaths, texts and commentaries concerning the movement make no mention of this service provision, for example, Buckstrom (1974). Co-operative retail outlets were in an ideal position to manage funerals due to the availability of existing property, an existing capital base and reputation generated through customer loyalty. However, initial

reaction by the existing industry to Co-operative societies becoming involved in the provision of funerals was antagonistic, as can be seen by the one of the first references in the trade press dated 1922:

"We read in the Northern Echo that owing to the refusal recently of livery stable keepers to supply carriages and horses to convey a coffin which was made by the Sunderland Co-op Society, it has been decided to establish a complete funeral furnishing department. The decision has come to be representative of practically the whole of the Co-op Societies in the Sunderland district, and a committee has been appointed to work at the details of a scheme" (BUA Monthly 1922: 86).

It is apparent that with a Co-operative society entering the industry a threat was presented to existing firms in the market. As the above illustrates, the Co-op - itself a heavily unionised organization - could not hire from carriage masters. The latter were members of the British Undertakers' Association (BUA) and negotiated rates and working practices and forbade members to deal with the societies.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, by extending funerals to its existing portfolio of retail goods and service, the organization prospered.

Not only does the entrance of the Co-operative movement into funerals append a

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<sup>1</sup> "Co-operative Societies as Funeral Furnishers" (1926) UJ May p126

further category to the 1900 typology advanced above, but from this perspective of the thrust of the argument in this chapter it also represented the first departure from the funeral organization being owned and managed by the same individual. Thus in contrast to the small family firm the owner was not the name that appeared above the door. Although similarities can be drawn between the departmental store, unlike the latter it did not sub-contract hire of vehicular resources. Furthermore, through owning and providing a network of branches it represented an integration of carriage master and small firm operating on a centralized basis.

As chapter 3 illustrated, it was during the 1920s and 1930s that undertaker's responsibility towards the dead body increased which was met with a response of initially providing shelter and at a later stage preservation. In addition, it was during the slightly later period that other societal changes occurred, such as the increase in cremation which developed in parallel to the transition to motor power and the appearance of mass-produced coffins. The level of increased responsibility gave funeral firms the ability and opportunity to centralize their high-cost capital resources. While from an organizational perspective improved telecommunications aided the process, in sociological terms population changes also contributed through suburbanization. Firms in such areas expanded to meet the demands of new areas whilst benefiting from centralized operations. For example, population migration from the south-eastern areas of inner London to the outer southern suburbs, such as Bromley, Orpington and Addiscombe can be seen to have occurred in the 1930s - a time when centralization was in its initial stages. As the services of funeral directors were required, firms like Francis Chappell and Frederick Paine expanded its operation to meet the growing



market opportunities. In the period 1922-1973, Francis Chappell increased its number of branch offices from 3 to 17. By 1962 the firm had 24 branches (Crichton 1976: 126). In the case of an acquisition by Francis Chappell a change in trading name usually followed soon afterwards. As Crichton noted,

“...the firm had began with one branch in Deptford in 1840. Then it grew through the generations of the Chappell family. As South-east London developed and the population passed out of the inner suburbs, Chappell's went with it....We spread to places like Bromley and Orpington, and by the mid 1930s we were doing about 3,000 funerals a year....In 1950 a local mason gave up the trade, and then in Woolwich a funeral director retired, and we succeeded to their business” (1976: 125-6).

He continues,

“But in going to a new town you have to wait and be patient. The population there is essentially young and the death-rate is very low. When we started in Crawley we were doing only about forty funerals a year. Now it's up to 300” (Crichton 1976: 125-6).

Just as Chappell's expanded, so did firms like FW Paine in south-west London. Likewise, the Co-operative Societies such as the London and South Suburban and the Royal Arsenal established branch office and exploited the virtues of centralization.

Following a brief review of the developments occurring as a result of the ability to apply centralization and organizational growth, the management of funerals under this system will be considered.

#### Expansion, acquisition and organizational developments 1960-1994

As mentioned in chapter 1, data detailing the precise number of funeral directing organizations in England and Wales does not exist. However, in the following sections figures relating to the expansion of Kenyon, Great Southern Group and Hodgson have been made possible due to their status as public limited companies. Further disclosure has also been possible through information contained in the MMC Report (1995).

Although considerable attention has been drawn by the media to the acquisitions of these three organizations, even by 1994 it was estimated that SCI controlled a total UK market share of only 12.7%. Whilst the Co-ops, although possessing "...few formal links, but a strong sense of common identity" (MMC 1995: 9) had just over a quarter of the market share, it was the independent funeral directors who formed the largest part of the industry.

### A typology at 1960

The growth of the branch office network sought not only to change the complete management of funerals in terms of organization, but also caused realignment of the structure of the industry. A snapshot of the industry at 1960 reveals the following:

A. Non-core or dual activity funeral directors. Such organizations would usually be located in rural areas and undertake funeral performance as a “side-line” to building, cabinet-making, vehicle hire or retailing. Such an organization would be family owned and managed, but may well utilise the vehicular resources of a neighbouring funeral director.

B. The family owned and managed core-activity specialist funeral directing firm arranging between 150-250 funerals a year from a single premises. This type of organization would conduct sufficient funerals to enable the purchase of a hearse and limousine and removal vehicle. The organization would also possess coffin storing and finishing facilities, a mortuary, chapel and office accommodation. Such an organization would probably be in the third generation of succession and correspondingly heavy reliance would be placed on survival through the maintenance of a reputation with the community.

C. The medium sized firm utilizing the principles of centralization with possibly 6 to 10 branch offices. This type of organization would probably be family owned and managed. Some branches would have been acquired non-aggressively, such as



firms the new owner previously supplied as a carriage master. It is also likely that the trading name of each acquired organization would have been retained. Others would have been established organically where the demand was apparent.

D. The Co-operative movement and large firms. Operating a centralized working system that often cover considerable geographic - usually urban - areas, the latter type of organization will have grown predominantly through acquisition, whilst the former organization almost exclusively by establishing new branches. There is a significant separation of ownership from control in such organizations and particularly the latter would be actively seeking opportunities for business expansion.

The four categories are essentially distinguished by ownership and consequently reflect the objectives of the owners. The dual-activity provides a service in response to local demand whilst their non-core activity supplies the mainstay. The objectives of the small firm, like the dual-activity will centre around survival whilst again meeting the financial needs of the owner. For the medium sized business, however, economies of scale gained through limited centralization will be a positive source of revenue for expansion and provide greater rewards for the shareholding family likely to be actively involved in the business. Finally, the management of the PLC and to a certain extent the Co-operatives will have a brief to match the expectations of their shareholders with those of profits. In addition, retained finance will be used to acquire firms. Like the three other classifications, turnover reflects mortality and client preference. However, with recently fluctuating death rates and newly emerging market opposition, the resultant need to achieve economies through control of operational costs may

underline conflict of objectives between management, staff and the bereaved. It is these latter points that will be discussed extensively below.

Although there is evidence to show that some firms acquired neighbouring organizations in a non-aggressive fashion, others such as the Co-operative preferred to established branch offices organically.

As had already been mentioned, the period 1960-1994 witnessed growth of the large organization primarily through branch office acquisition. As the vast majority of firms acquired in the last thirty years were family owned and managed, it is therefore necessary to examine why such a situation occurred.

### Problems facing small funeral organizations

The small family firm has been a characteristic of the funeral industry for many years. However, like many small businesses it is clear that this organizational structure has faced increasing problems as a result of social, economic and technical changes. Two major areas specifically relating to funerals can be identified.

The first concerns the dilemma of succession and particularly following the death of the owner when no male family member is willing or able to manage the business. Acquisition provides a solution to the problem of succession as well as revenue for the estate. It is perhaps significant to note that even in the pre-industrial era the funeral

industry has always been dominated by the male gender. Although this could stem from the tradition of the male working in craft related occupations such as carpentry, it could also be from the fact that in some communities, such as certain regions in Wales, females do not attend funeral rituals.<sup>2</sup> However, a number of examples can be cited of female relations in senior positions with firms, such as Ann Bonham of Northampton (Hodgson 1992: 43). Although a male (or female) may be available to enter the family business, several factors can be identified that prove to be stumbling blocks to business lineage. Despite the pursuit of professionalization (see chapter 6), Saunders (1991: 204 & 1995) identifies a stigma attached to occupations that deal with the dead. In addition, the commitment of providing a 24 hour service can act as an effective deterrent to entering the industry. The increased opportunities of intra-generational social mobility (Abercrombie et al 1988: 196) may also be seen to lead siblings away from funeral directing as a career. The responsibility of managing a small business may also discourage entry.

Goss identifies that small businesses generally

“...offer fewer promotion prospects, less job security and lower wages”  
(1991: 56).

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<sup>2</sup> Certainly in Muslim communities women do not attend funeral services and the presence of a female funeral director would be deemed offensive to their culture.



The second problem relates to the evidence demonstrating that the economic viability of many small funeral organizations had become suspect. Essentially, the viability of a funeral organization rests not only on the reasonably secure number of deaths occurring in the locality, but also through the reputation of the organization essentially generated by the years of service to a community. However, the effects of this perceived market stability resulted in funeral directors believing that their organization was immune to the myriad of environmental changes. Two examples illustrate this argument.

Firstly, evidence indicating increasing consumer awareness of price coupled with a tendency to “shop around” has challenged the reliance on past customer loyalty. Although precise figures detailing the increase in telephone quotations do not exist (they appear to be as closely guarded as the number of funerals actually undertaken) discussion with funeral directors in particularly urban areas reported an increase in this trend within the last ten years. Secondly, changes in the social composition of an area, such as Handsworth in Birmingham (Hodgson 1992: 11) illustrates population dispersion and the fact few people are dying in a community. With geographic mobility, siblings returning to arrange a funeral may not know who is the established or “usual” firm in the area. Thus whilst the strength of recommendation from family and friends has possibly decreased, as death has become institutionalized, those involved in the disposal process, such as hospital administrators now occupy a strategic position of influence. It would be fair to say that the vast majority of funeral directors have not had business training. Being a technical qualification, the Diploma in Funeral Directing does not embrace any business disciplines, and particularly those who have succeeded

into family firms would have had little opportunity to broaden their commercial perspective through the pressure of work. It is thus likely that the effects of competitive and environmental influences may not always be recognised. Evidence of this myopic vision towards change is provided by Hodgson (1992). As he wryly comments:

“...the whole profession while being extremely decent, honest and hardworking always damaged itself by its small-minded obsession with its local competitor. I never visited a funeral director in order to acquire him, without having to listen to the “disgusting behaviour” of his competitor down the road for at least two hours before we could turn our attention to the business in hand - theirs. The vast majority of funeral directors are wonderful with their clients but if they bit their tongues while talking about their competitors they would probably die from septicaemia” (Hodgson 1992: 98).

The literal effect of such inertia was to reduce the overall long-term profitability of organizations operating in particularly urban areas. As owners sought to maintain a steady return from their business, despite the decline in available funerals they were caught by two problems. Firstly, the amount of retained profit declined for capital improvements and investment, such as the purchase of new vehicles, modernization of premises or investment in staff. If the business operating against a competitor that was owned by a large organization and had for example invested in premises improvement, the small business would be at a strategic disadvantage, particularly if a carefully

managed public relations programme had accompanied the refurbishment.

Secondly, as the margin of profitability declined, owners would be forced to seek ways of sustaining a standard of revenue by cost-cutting. By disposing of capital assets, such as vehicles and hiring all resources from other firms - depending on the number of funerals undertaken - a reduction in expenditure could be achieved. However, working in conjunction with another possible rival firm meant that the availability of resources was reduced and as control passed to a different organization the risk of standards falling could not be ruled out.

For the small business facing these problems a number of alternatives are available. Boswell (1973) sees the application of one of three approaches for business survival in the face of a declining market; rationalization; specialization; and diversification. Although a limited amount of diversification took place in the form of Hodgson marketing financial services through the network of branches, with funeral directing being a highly specialised industry and as capital equipment was only applicable for one use, for example, hearses or refrigeration, the possibility of adopting any of these three strategies is almost entirely eliminated.

In the face of a decline in the number of deaths in predominantly urban areas and the fact that such areas have remained competitive (although a fall in the number of firms is recorded), it is clear that the most realistic option open for owners would be to sell their business. The trend in mergers and acquisitions that occurred from around the late 1960s is noted by The Acton Society (Goodman 1969: 54-5) who detected that



industries in a declining market faced with a falling demand for their product or service tended to sell so that horizontal or vertical integration could bring economies of scale. Whilst in general business terms the 1960s and 1970s was one of merger mania, in funerals a number of non-aggressive acquisitions occurred between neighbouring firms that had formed and maintained a relationship by hiring resources from each other. However, as the following section illustrates, it was soon clear that funeral firms were a lucrative source of income and became sought-after economic units.

#### Mergers and acquisitions 1970-1994

Between the years 1970 and 1994 the most significant characteristic of the UK funeral industry was an upsurge of merger and acquisition activity. In the initial period of expansion (1970 - early 1980s) evidence exists to demonstrate that firms without a previous record of involvement in funerals such as Musical and Plastic Industries (Crichton 1976: 126), and Gerrard and National Temple Securities made acquisitions in the industry (Hodgson 1992: 112). Dealings were usually short term and in the latter involved asset-stripping by the disposal of valuable surplus property.

However, it was during the 1980s that specialist funeral companies commenced an acquisition contest financed chiefly by share issues and operating profits resulting from the centralized management of funerals. Three PLC organizations emerged to dominate the period 1982 to 1994: The Great Southern Group, Hodgson Holdings and Kenyon Securities. In addition, various Co-operative Societies and other organizations

also made acquisitions. As it was the three former organizations that pursued acquisition, integration and rationalization on an unprecedented scale, analysis is warranted here.

The large organizations identified the possibilities resultant from centralization and also the increasing availability of independent firms for acquisition. More importantly they required capital specifically for this purpose and became public limited companies to obtain such finance. Before looking in detail at the rationale and developments underlying this period, it is worth briefly considering the primary developments of each of the three organizations mentioned above.

Each organization had been involved in funeral directing for sometime prior to the heady period of the 1980s. The Great Southern Group commenced as a cemetery and then crematoria operator, diversifying backwards into funeral directing in 1972 with the portentous acquisition of London Necropolis which included some twenty branches of FW Paine (Crichton 1976: 127).<sup>3</sup> By 1975 the Group had acquired a total of 32 funeral branch offices and at the end of five years a further 37 had come under their ownership, mainly the substantial firm of Francis Chappell in south east London and north Kent. By 1986, the Group's retail outlets totalled 92 which in the year ended December 1985 had carried out 22,000 funerals. The Group also controlled 9

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the holding company of the Great Southern - JD Field - were originally funeral directors owning the firm of Bedford & Slater in Blackfriars Road, London. The organization was sold at the time of WWII.

crematoria, responsible for 22,640 cremations and 516 burials (MMC 1995).

James Harold Kenyon commenced trading in central London in 1875 predominantly as a carriage master. The location of the firm resulted in the undertaking of many prestigious funerals and after being entrusted with the funeral arrangement of the late King George VI, Kenyon's reputation became firmly established as the funeral director to London society. In the 1960s and 1970s the firm acquired a number of funeral firms in West London and in 1975 a subsidiary company, Kenyon Air Transportation was established to provide a worldwide repatriation service. Somewhat smaller than the Great Southern, by 1984 it had 22 branches and a coffin manufacturing business.

Like Kenyon and Great Southern, Hodgson Holdings was a family organization that had grown through acquisition after Howard Hodgson has purchased his father's ailing firm in 1975. Hodgson recognised the market-related problem and sought to increased turnover by integrating an acquired local business in his "cluster". Other acquisitions soon followed. By 1988, Hodgson possessed 263 branches managing over 40,000 funerals a year.

The flotation by Kenyon, Great Southern Group and Hodgson Holdings in 1983, 1986 and 1987 respectively gave each organization funds, firstly to reduce borrowing by lowering their gearing ratio and secondly - and most importantly - capital with which to acquire more funeral businesses. With all three organizations possessing capital for expansion opportunities existing in the market for acquisition and all now conscious of the additional need to satisfy shareholders it was clear that a race had begun to acquire



funeral directing firms.

All three organizations were aware of the problems facing small operators - as outlined in the previous sections. Hodgson in particular believed that it was the inefficient operational basis on which the small firms were managed that made them ripe for acquisition. In a share placing prospectus he stated, "The existence of economies of scale in the industry (because of the high cost of fixed assets required) means that these smaller firms are often uneconomic" (Hodgson 1986: 8).

He later stated

"Why should I watch small independent businesses struggling in competition with each other, all of them having highly valuable vehicles, refrigeration units, embalming facilities and staff, when I was sure that by amalgamating some of those assets I could run perhaps five of them as cheaply as one? At current prices, the half-dozen funerals a weeks that a small business might expect to handle would bring in about £3,500, and involve about forty man hours each, but five firms could bring in £15,000 for the same amount of equipment and hardly any increase in staff. This would make possible improvements in standards of service, which could not otherwise have been achieved and enable those improved standards to be offered more cheaply" (Hodgson 1992: 36).

To reduce this unprofitable situation, Hodgson and the other two organizations rationalized immediately upon acquisition. However, for the following reasons it became clear that expansion through acquisition had its limitations.

Firstly, some funeral directors were not interested in selling their business. Reasons for non-sale include the availability of succession, ideology towards the large organizations or insufficient price offered.

Secondly, from the perspective of the purchasing organization, an operational centre or "cluster" might not be within a convenient radius. Thus a prospective firm although viable but away from an existing cluster could only be managed as a "mini-cluster". As a result operational costs may reduce the profit margin.

Thirdly, some funeral directors were unwilling to sell their business - as a matter of principle - to a PLC due to the perceived loss of "personalization". As Saunders states:

"Some small funeral directors already have an indirect label for the large group: "Hodgson? He is not a proper funeral director, gives the trade a bad name through his impersonal approach" (1991: 206).

During the 1980s the effect of rationalization upon a highly personal business were becoming apparent as the acquisition train rolled on. Nevertheless expansion increased. For example, in 1987 The Great Southern Group acquired 17 funeral businesses providing 20 further branches to the existing 92. Hodgson pursued the same

policies and from June 1986 to May 1987 a 70% increase in number of funerals from 5,600 to 9,500 per annum was recorded as a result of adding 52 outlets to the organization which complemented the current geographical areas of operation as well as new ones.

Hodgson warned at the end of 1988 that with concentration occurring on such a considerable scale the number of acquisitions could not be maintained and warned of a slower rate of expansion in 1989. Attention was then turned to medium and large-sized organizations. For example, Kenyon acquired the enormous London firm of Dottridge Brothers for £11.5M adding 5,750 funerals, and Hodgson purchased part of the House of Fraser's funeral directing assets - some 13,000 funerals per annum.

It was at this stage that a growing backlash by the industry appeared towards the attitude and modus operandi of the large firms. A number of issues can be identified. Firstly, the retention of the trading name by large organizations (an issue discussed later in this chapter). Secondly, economic power exerted over suppliers and thirdly, the strength large organizations possessed over the financial position of trade associations - block withdrawal could prove to be disastrous.

In the late 1980s a trade association - the Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors (SAIF) - was established to protect the interests of small businesses. In addition, some firms of funeral directors left the NAFD deciding that SAIF's objectives matched their characteristics of independence more than the NAFD's.



Further rationalization of the industry intensified when Hodgson Holdings merged Kenyon Securities PLC to form PFG Hodgson Kenyon International PLC. The effect of this newly formed alliance was to create a funeral directing firm carrying out approximately 65,000 funerals a year and controlling an estimated 20% of the market in the UK. Hodgson expressed the logic of the deal,

“The total market was flat, even declining, and would be for another ten years. Funeral prices had not risen, and were still not rising, as fast as inflation. Over 80% of the cost of funerals were fixed, and therefore the opportunities for economies of scale were overwhelming” (1992: 117).

Although Hodgson and Kenyon did have relatively distinct trading areas, the aftermath of the merger led to intense rationalization of resources, including redundancies. In addition, the organization was now in a position to obtain greater purchasing discounts of coffins, soft furnishings, vehicles, etc.

In August 1994, the American funeral organization Service Corporation International (SCI) acquired the Great Southern Group, followed a month later by the Plantsbrook Group. Established in Texas in 1962, SCI owns funeral directors, cemeteries and crematoria in the USA, Canada and Australia. More recently it has also acquired a proportion of the French funeral market.<sup>4</sup> As a result of the merger, total market share

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<sup>4</sup>The MMC report (MMC 1995: 33) contains a brief history of SCI.

was in the region of 14% with the number of branches aggregating 520. The second acquisition was followed by an investigation by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission. Their report of May 1995 concluded;

“...that the merger may be expected to operate against the public interest” (MMC 1995: 4).

The report offered the following reasons as detrimental to the supply of funerals arising from the merger; that SCI would raise prices excessively; lack of true ownership identified to clients and the choice of firms in ten areas were restricted. The principal recommendations were the sale of ten branch offices, ownership disclosure and pricing transparency (MMC 1995: 4). Although SCI challenged this in the Court of Appeal, the decision was upheld.

Also highlighted was concern over the retention of the original trading name and the fact that SCI now owned crematoria in areas heavily concentrated by their own funeral directors such as south London. The MMC believed that this would result in funerals being directed to these facilities thereby restricting public choice. SCI agreed to give an undertaking that

“...it would post details of competing crematoria at every SCI funeral directing branch in the area of an SCI crematorium” (MMC 1995: 5).

Whilst the latter issue concerning the possession of crematoria, although allied is essentially outside the scope of this thesis as it specifically concerns funeral directing in addition to the fact that the MMC report provides a full commentary and analysis, retention of the trading name and issues connected with the large organization in the industry are discussed in the following sections.

#### Centralization - a Fordist-style approach to funeral management

The concept of centralization as manifest in the large firms is not new to the funeral industry. As has been illustrated in the first part of this chapter, it was the work of the carriage master who on a similar basis supplied transport requirements to small firms. However, as chapters 2 and 3 respectively detailed, since the 1920s societal and technical developments have considerably assisted in the growth of centralization, such as the shift from animate to motor power and the retention of the body on the funeral director's premises. In conjunction with the increase in responsibility assigned to the funeral director, the latter has been able to capitalise upon this control of funerals in an effective manner. The growth of large organizations from the 1950s indicate that principles of centralization can be applied successfully to manage funerals. It is therefore not surprising - as evidenced above - that some organizations manage up to thirty branch office from one centralized unit.



The growth of the large funeral organizations can chiefly be attributed to the utilization of centralized control in their efforts to use economic resources to an optimum level. With the integration of acquired branch offices into a centralized area of operation, the necessity for each branch to operate as an independent self-sufficient economic unit is removed and responsibility for provision for all resources is shifted to the operational centre. The centralization of activities - particularly on a large scale - appears to be in contrast to the prevailing trend of de-centralization that has occurred in other industries during the last ten years.

Centralization in the funeral industry essentially manages funerals on a production or assembly line - a Fordist-style approach to internal funeral administration. Each task that comprises the work of the funeral director - from arranging the funeral through to its performance - is divided amongst a number of specialist functionaries and departments. In a similar manner to the motor vehicle being constructed as it moves through the assembly line, so when a funeral is arranged the body becomes the unit which is processed through the departments at the centralized operational nucleus and emerges to occupy the most important position at the funeral (Naylor 1989).

The centralized system commences with the client's first contact to arrange the funeral in the branch office. A date and time for the funeral is organized through liaising with the administration office and when all external and internal documentation has been completed, full funeral details are forwarded to the head office. The administration office - the nerve centre of the operation - then becomes responsible for channelling appropriate information to departments, such as embalming and the coffin workshop.

After the administration has organized the removal of the body to the centralized premises, a process of embalming, coffin preparation, encoffining and transport to the branch office is completed in turn. On the day prior to the funeral an administrator generates a work programme detailing the resources required for each funeral - vehicles, manpower and equipment. Each funeral is booked to enable a "work-over" from one funeral to another so that all resources are utilized to their optimum potential without the need for hired-in additional assistance or slack. At any given time the administration will have knowledge of the movements of all personnel, vehicles, stock and at which point the body is on the line of process.

The advantages to funeral organizations of centralized management are two-fold. Firstly, economies of scale can be gained from the bulk purchase of coffins and other variable cost items, such as coffin linings and petrol. One major garage, embalming theatre, mortuary and coffin workshop and store has to exist to serve the branches. Secondly, centralization allows for control over resources so that costly fixed overheads such as vehicles and staff can be utilised in the most cost and time-effective manner. Although these are benefits experienced by the firm, it is argued here that from the perspective of the client utilizing the services of a large organization no evidence exists to suggest in financial terms or otherwise that the financial gain attributable to centralization benefits the bereaved.

In the following section two issues concerning the operation of the large organizations are discussed, followed in the final section by a critique of funerals under a centralized management.

## The Large Organization - organizational and operational issues

### Retention of the trading name

An important area concerning the operation of the large organization is that of retention of a trading name following the acquisition of a funeral firm. In such a circumstance it is held that the illusion is given of the personality and individuality associated with the small family firm being retained although it is owned by a large organization and managed on a centralized basis. When acquisitions have occurred with other service industries owned by a large organization such as estate agents and tour operators a uniform change of name has occurred, thus revealing the identity of the ultimate owner or a nationwide trading name. Retention in the funeral industry has been due to the strength of the trading identity and hence reputation. Smale sees trading identity as

“...the most marketable commodity he [the funeral director] possesses”  
(1985: 235).

Hennessy (1980: 44), Foster (1987: 13) and the Price Commission (FC 1986: 5) confirm this. However, there is clear evidence to show that it is the change in ownership with the retention of the trading name which has provoked much controversy, especially within the funeral industry. Evidence cited in the MMC Report (1987) stated;



“Nearly one-quarter of the adverse comments we received about the supply of funeral undertaking services related to an alleged CWS policy of giving the public an illusion of undiminished choice by omitting to trade openly as CWS after taking over independent funeral directors” (MMC 1987: 35).

The strong feelings were made clear by a communication the Commission received from one funeral director,

“In failing to make it plain that a formerly family-owned business was now operated by CWS it was guilty of calculated deception and many bereaved persons were unaware that they were employing CWS” (MMC 1987: 40).

From the perspective of the client this “calculated deception” relates to the situation where a client would not wish to be associated with the organization for a specific reason, for example through the past experience of a spoilt performance. If the client requires the services of a funeral director in an area represented by only the first encountered firm and a neighbouring firm - both owned by the same organization - it is likely they would both be furnished by the same centralized operational unit. In this case the body would be handled by the same staff in the same operational unit that deals with the first branch. In these monopolistic trading circumstances, without the family being aware of the ultimate ownership the organization could be deemed guilty of “calculated deception” by not revealing its relationship to an organization the client

does not wish to be associated with.

Contained in the MMC report (1995) is a recommendation for SCI and all funeral firms with branch offices operating under different trading names to reveal such information:

“...to disclose its ownership of funeral directing businesses in the determined areas prominently in all documentation presented to customers and in all advertisements or other promotional material used in connection with those businesses. We believe it is highly desirable that the disclosure of ultimate ownership of funeral directing branches should be general practice throughout the UK” (MMC 1995: 5).

However, it only remains as a recommendation for all organizations and one that can only ultimately be enforced through legislation.

As mentioned above, this issue appears to be of keen interest to the industry. It is of note therefore that a recent small-scale interview questionnaire concerning the bereaved and the funeral director revealed that

“...the actual ownership of the chosen funeral service was of little interest to most respondents” (Hopwood 1996: 15).

Although it could be argued that at a time of bereavement the client may not be in a position to make an informed choice, this nevertheless does indicate that whilst that ownership is unimportant both price and quality of service remain factors indicative of satisfaction. As the analysis below together with the fieldwork in the following chapter reveals, price and service are important issues when contrasting the operations of the large organization with that of the small independent firm.

### The objectives of shareholders and employees

Ideally funeral directing demands that the highest motives and ethical standards are maintained when serving the bereaved. However, it is clear that when organizations expand this can lead to the pursuit of alternative objectives.

Cyert and March argue that "...organizations do not have objectives, only people have objectives" (1963) - a statement confirmed by Lawrence & Lorsch (1967). In the light of the large organizations operating in the funeral industry it is possible to identify the pursuit of short-term financial objectives.

For investors to maintain their shareholding in a PLC organization, it is paramount that returns are forthcoming and to achieve this the organization must be profitable and experience growth. Funeral directing firms essentially rely on the occurrence of death for their survival. However, the industry also relies on consumer preference. In addition, factors such as the organization's reputation, price, as well as consumer recommendation also influences choice. However, this poses the strategic question - if



funeral directing is the principal activity, what happens if a reduction in the number of funerals arranged is encountered? In broader terms this could be expressed: how will a firm meet the expectations of its shareholders as a result of a nationwide reduction in the number of deaths? The implication of this situation is indeed significant for all size of funeral organization.

For the large organization, a balance must exist between equating the levels of growth and retained profits for re-investment with that of the demands of shareholders. However, it is attempting to satisfy this objective that conflict can arise as stakeholders may demand a return for their investment when trading conditions peculiar to the funeral industry dictate that a dividend cannot be sustained. To prevent the withdrawal of shareholder support, sales revenue must be maximized. In a theory proposed by Baumol (1959) gross sales income - not sales volume - is maximized. Under this situation a minimum level of shareholder expectation can be met whilst earning a minimum level of profit. For managers in the funeral industry this could be achieved by encouraging staff to "sell-up" the coffin range or increase the number of additional services sold to clients. As chapter 1 indicated, the coffin can be identified as the variable overhead - one carrying a high level of mark-up - and therefore the contribution towards marginal revenue is significantly increased through selling a more expensive coffin from the range. By adopting such a strategy, the shareholders are satisfied (Simon 1959) as an acceptable minimum level of profitability is achieved. To encourage the sale of a more expensive coffin staff could be offered commission. However, such a supply-sided strategy reflects the desire for the funeral director to

increase revenue, not necessarily from desire by the client to purchase a more expensive coffin. It is therefore clear that in such a situation where a coalition of different interest groups exists, conflict is apparent through the pursual of such a goal (Cyert and March 1963). For example, the funeral arranger may influence a client in a vulnerable disposition - perhaps when guilt is being experienced by the bereaved (Fulton 1965: 110) - to commit themselves to a funeral they really cannot afford. However, when, in a more rational frame of mind, the client considers the expenditure, reflection on the employment of a pressurized sale technique may occur. The long term effect for the organization may be failure to utilize the services of the firm when a future bereavement occurs in addition to incurring a bad debt. For funeral arranging employees receiving a low wage level - such as part-time staff - the accrual of commission payments can considerably enhance earnings. Commission can therefore be deemed to be a motivator by encouraging the bereaved to purchase a higher priced coffin than would otherwise be selected.

### The centralized management of funerals - a critique

The application of centralization reflects the organization's managements' perception of how funerals can be managed. Whilst the small organization operates in an informal manner, the large funeral firm operates on more formal and standardized principles. This injection of formality is necessary to achieve the required control over operations and utilization of resources. However, it is argued here that this has implications for all involved in the process.

Schein see the formal organization as

“...the planned co-ordination of the activities of a number of people for the achievement of some common, explicit purpose or goal, though division of labour and function, and through a hierarchy of authority and responsibility” (1988: 15).

Developing the ideas of Weber (1947), Stewart (1986) summarises the characteristics of the modern bureaucracy as specialization; hierarchy of authority; system of rules and impersonality. The centralized management of funerals relies on the assumption that the environment of funeral performance has a degree of stability (Burns and Stalker 1966). Where the conditions are predictable, familiar and routine Burns and Stalker (1966) argue that a suitable system of control would be through a bureaucracy. However, where the business environment is unstable, unpredictable and fluid - for example, due to market changes and changing demands of clients - it should be managed on more informal and flexible lines. The first is termed mechanistic whilst the second organic (or organismic). The fact that a bureaucratic system is more appropriate to some organizations than to others is reinforced by Gouldner (1954). Like Burns and Stalker, Gouldner believes that bureaucracy is not well suited to non-routine, unpredictable operations. It is important to note that the mechanistic and organic structures are purely theoretical models; many organizations will be a hybrid of both structures designed to meet the needs of their organization. Examples of the first three characteristics of bureaucracy in the context of funeral directing are outlined here.



Firstly, staff are employed in specialist capacities to perform one or a few specifically defined tasks. Such classifications represent specialization and fragmentation of the work. Staff in the branch offices solely arrange and administer funerals and escort clients into the chapel of rest. At the head office where both physical and administrative tasks are performed the chauffeur bearers drive and clean the vehicles, carry coffins when attending funerals and remove bodies from the place of repose. They may also prepare coffins and encoffin the bodies. Similarly, the embalmer is engaged solely to sanitize and to prepare bodies, whilst a “pool” of conductors is maintained exclusively to supervise the drama and ritual of the funeral ceremony. Administrators have the overall responsibility for co-ordinating the activities, channelling information and ensuring the funeral operation runs smoothly.

Secondly, funeral arranging staff have little authority to make decision concerning funeral-related matters and especially prices. All decision making comes from a hierarchy and a scalar chain of command exists to manage day-to-day problems and make rulings.

Thirdly, the existence of rules which enable the organization to fulfil its objectives creates a degree of uniformity and standardization. For example, all offices possess one conventional funeral arrangement form and all stationery corresponds to the corporate identity. Uniform documents with information required by each department are completed by the funeral arranger during the funeral arrangement interview and forwarded to head office. Arranging staff are required to complete specific documents in a certain order.

Although large organizations do not generally issue rules as to how funerals should be arranged or conducted by staff operating in these specialist functions, it usually dictates how the administrative tasks should be processed and information recorded. Tasks undertaken by operative grade employees, such as the chauffeur bearers are detailed in writing, for example the daily work programme or identification procedures. All funeral arrangers work from a predetermined schedule of costs that is standardized across the branches.

It is this utilization of bureaucratic principles in the highly personal funeral service that has resulted in funeral performance becoming “quasi-MacDonalized” (Ritzer 1993). In the same way that the disposal process has become severely rationalized, it is argued in this section that a consequence of the adoption of MacDonald-like characteristics has been an increase in the level of impersonalization in the mode by which the large organization manages funerals.

The inter-related characteristics of MacDonaldization - efficiency, predictability and quantification essentially stem from the need to control. In terms of predictability, exactly how an event will be performed can be determined from historical information and data. In large organizations reliance is placed on the fact that funerals take a predictable amount of time to be completed. Hence they can be scheduled at set intervals with the minimum of manpower/vehicle wastage. Distances between branches and crematoria or cemeteries can be determined thus facilitating other funerals to be “worked” around an initial commitment, thus deriving optimum and efficient use of manpower and vehicles. Similarly, historical data can help ascertain the number of

funerals that are likely to be undertaken in a given period thus predicting the number of vehicles and level of manpower required, in addition to the number of coffins required. Thus it can be seen that stability (Burns and Stalker 1966) of the funeral environment is assumed. However, whilst in the long-term the occurrence of death is essentially predictable, like any service industry, an element of the unpredictability of demand is a characteristic of funeral directing. What may appear to be sufficient resources may not take into account seasonal or other fluctuations. Whilst the latter will restrict the number of funerals undertaken in one day, if additional resources are not brought in the consequence will be an increased interval between death and disposal for the bereaved. Quantification permits costs to be monitored and controlled. In addition to the likely number of funerals, types of coffins, furnishings, etc., that will be sold can be estimated thus reducing stock levels and preventing capital tied up in stock. As a standardized range of coffins is maintained with quantity of types stocked again reflecting historical evidence, economies are achieved.

In the utilization of bureaucratic principles in the funeral context Hodgson's organization was almost Tayloristic. Hodgson rigorously implemented a number of strategies to control internal operations and therefore costs. The following examples illustrate.

Firstly, a standardized procedure to integrate acquired businesses into his operational clusters was effected. In the shareholder's subscribing document the following can be found:



“The policy of your company is expansion through acquisition - a philosophy which to date has been put successfully into practice by the purchase of small and medium sized businesses.

“The formula used is simple but effective with three ingredients being critical to its success. Firstly, the business acquired is brought swiftly and efficiently into the Group structure by means of detailed check lists containing over 150 procedures and operating methods to be implemented. Secondly, economies of scale are made (without detriment to the high standard of service expected by the Board) as soon as practicably possible. Finally, and in conjunction with the first two steps, rigorous and regular reporting requirements applied consistently throughout the Group are introduced” (Hodgson 1992: 73).

In addition, the introduction of a set of standardized documents, coffin range, vehicle design and manpower livery not only reduced capital expenditure (through achieving purchasing economies) but also created corporate identity - a characteristic of businesses in the 1980s. However, this replaced the personal image of each organization acquired with the exception of the trading identity.

Secondly, Hodgson created a uniform fleeting formula thus exercising control over the booking of funerals. Furnishing the funerals with vehicles and manpower is the most expensive overhead for firms and in order to control this outflow Hodgson introduced his most radical idea that can almost parallel with the principles of scientific

management. Taylor's (1947) rational-economic needs concept sought to control production through efficient working practices, procedures for co-ordination and total control of the worker by management. Hodgson's fleeting formula was a ratio equation based on the number vehicles and staff against the number of expected funerals. His "F-Formula" represented an equation where resources were allocated according to the number of funerals. For example, when 150 funerals were performed by the cluster, a hearse and a limousine and two full-time chauffeur bearers would be provided. The rationale was that with 150 funerals spread evenly over the year the chauffeur bearers would not be engaged on funerals all the time. Therefore the two manual staff would also be able to remove bodies, prepare coffins and encoffin bodies, wash vehicles, etc. with any additional staff required being hired on a part-time basis only when needed, for example to make up a team of four coffin bearers. Through rigorous implementation and regulation of timings for funerals to "work-over" from one to another, capital costs in the form of fleet and manpower requirements could be reduced. However, like other aspects of this strategy of control decision making appeared to be made on quantitative analysis.

By offering a nationwide standardized coffin selection, discounts could be negotiated thereby obtaining economies of scale from manufacturers.

Thirdly, Hodgson introduced strict reporting requirements. Before the close of each working day each branch in the group would be telephoned and staff questioned as the number of funerals arranged (thus indicating forthcoming income), problems on funerals, funeral businesses for sale in the locality, etc. All information would be passed

to the area manager, then a regional executive who would then give Hodgson a precis of the responses. Hodgson understood that control was the key to operations and with daily reports he understood he could achieve this.

Whilst the centralized management of funerals successfully achieves the objectives of large scale operation in maximizing revenue and therefore profitability, a number of negative consequences are attributable to its employment. In the following section two inter-related issues are considered from the perspective of both clients and employees; (i) depersonalization, and (ii) deskilling.

The discussion of these issues is intended to provide background to the empirical data contained in the ensuing chapter which contrasts the operation between a large centralized organization and that of a small independent firm.

#### i) Depersonalization

For the bereaved the funeral is a highly personal and unique experience. Its performance is the culmination of preparatory events undertaken in conjunction with the funeral director in the days following death. Throughout the dealings with the funeral director and at the time of the funeral an appropriate level of personalization must exist.



Although this analysis specifically concerns the role of the individual funeral director, it must be pointed out that the latter is but one functionary that contributes in a paid capacity to the actual funeral as a complex social and organizational event. The crematorium and/or cemetery and the priest/officiant execute duties that are vital to satisfactory performance. Whilst the funeral director negotiates their utilization in his/her role as agent (see chapter 1), it must be emphasised that their employment means that the funeral director effectively has little control over their performance. As such, the whole of the funeral ceremony can be marred or enhanced by the quality of their contribution as perceived by the bereaved (This is an issue that will be considered again in the following chapter).

As mentioned above, the bereaved interacts with the funeral director firstly when preparations for pre-disposal are being effected and secondly at the actual time of the funeral. Within the operations of the large organization it is argued here that it is possible to identify varying levels in the degree of personalization during the whole process. Evidence is further presented to demonstrate that certain uniform operational policies in large organizations can contribute to the level of personalization.

In considering personalization of the actual funeral ceremony - arguably the climax of this rite of passage - task demarcation as utilized by large firms can result in a lack of continuity between funeral arranger and conductor. When clients arrange a funeral they meet a member of staff exclusively committed to arranging and administering the funeral. Through the interview conversation a rapport is frequently generated.

However, on the day of the funeral a different employee arrives to supervise the ritual as conducting is not within the employment ambit of the first employee. Thus through demarcation staff are not in a position to manage the funeral as a continuous event and in a manner that would extend the maximum level of personal support to the bereaved.

The use of female staff as arrangers and administrators can be seen to be attributable to this lack of continuity. Whilst the female staff remain in the office, male conductors who have no prior knowledge of the family - and particularly with whom to identify - represent the organization for the duration of the funeral. The tendency to restrict females to the office can be ascribed to the following reasons.

Firstly, the notion that funeral directing and especially the physical and non-administrative aspects are male orientated due to physical strength required in lifting and lowering coffins. Secondly, the funerals that are arranged by especially part-time female staff will not always coincide with employment hours.

In terms of personalization it must be pointed out that as with funeral arranging the degree of rapport generated with clients essentially abides in the aptitude of the funeral director. The interest and motivation the funeral conductor has in the occupation as well as in the family being served all reflect the willingness to personalize the experience. If the funeral is one not arranged by the conductor and/or one of four or five in the day then the conductor may be preoccupied with the following perhaps more complex funeral. In recognising this problem, some large organizations give the

name of the conductor to the family as soon as it is known; others ensure the conductor makes contact with the family to introduce himself a day before the funeral.

In further balancing this argument and has already been mentioned in conjunction with the issue of retention of the trading name, the bereaved are perhaps not the best appraisers of the level of personalization through continuity between arranger and conductor due to the infrequency of encounter with organizations. The empathy of both individuals at each stage of encounter, particularly if they do not expect a female to conduct may influence their perception of the degree of personalization.

In a similar vein to the aspect of continuity between conductor and arranger is the number of people with whom the client will encounter when telephoning or calling at the office at various times after the initial arrangements have been made. A high frequency of dialogue with a number of functionaries may give rise to the notion that the client's personal arrangements are being dealt with by a variety of employees and without one person having overall identifiable responsibility.

As mentioned above one consequence of the large funeral organizations operating bureaucratic principles is the degree of uniformity - a key area of depersonalization. Whilst these may not be immediately detectable to the client their existence can be observed upon closer examination and can be seen to result in a reduced degree of personalization.



The enforcement of uniform fleeting policies is a major area as the exercise of control through this technique coincides with the utilization of resources to an optimum level - thus maximum profitability. However, whilst such a policy benefits the organization it correspondingly can be seen to lead to compromise by clients.

The implementation of a controlled fleeting policy can create a lack of attempting to adhere to express personal wishes of clients as the latter may be coerced into accepting a date and time for the funeral that is primarily of convenience to the organization. To obtain the optimum level of vehicle and manpower utilization the large organization attempts to programme funerals to occur at two hour intervals - 10.00, 12.00 2.00 and 4.00 in terms of the time of arrival at the place of disposal. In such cases the hearse and staff can successfully "work-over". By only offering clients funeral times under this administration results in a first come, first served basis of allocation for the most favoured times for funerals - between 11.00 and 2.00. Clients must either accept funerals at other times or experience an extended duration between death and disposal in order to be accommodated at a specific time. On economic grounds large organizations are not willing to hire in additional vehicular and manpower resources due to the reduced profit margin this will entail.

Following the merger with Kenyon, Hodgson's fleeting policies clashed with the idiosyncratic demands of the latter's central London clientèle. The Kenyon policy had always been to operate a flexible system when booking funerals which invariably involved clashing funeral times and hiring additional resources. The complexity and length of the funerals compounded by traffic problems in this urban area and the

distance between branches and place of disposal dramatically restricted the number of funeral times available under this formula. Staff at Kenyon were fully aware of Hodgson's *modus operandi* relying on the grapevine or "crem culture" for information prior to the merger.<sup>5</sup> They became only too aware that the individuality created by past tradition would be eliminated.

## ii) Deskilling

As organizations expand greater control is required to monitor processes and output in order to achieve maximum profitability. One approach in the early part of this century in the heavy manufacturing industry (Brown 1954: 12) was through scientific management as advanced by Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1917). Taylor held that by reducing a process into small time-controlled units the worker fulfils specific tasks. Thus complete control is achieved by management. Whilst there is no evidence to demonstrate that the technique - originally applied to heavy manual tasks - has not been implemented to such a severe degree in the funeral industry, parallels can be drawn between deskilling of the funeral director's work and that of fragmentation and routinization (Braverman 1974) as created by the adoption of centralization and as

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<sup>5</sup> The term "crem culture" refers to the verbal discourse occurring among funeral staff from different organizations when they meet during funerals at crematoria. As is normal with the informal networks accurate as well as distorted information is communicated. The term is derived from the "canteen culture" as identified in the police force by Burke (1993). A similar term "mortuary gossip" is utilized by Howarth (1993: 52).

found in Taylorism.

To achieve the required degree of control over the whole funeral operation the large organizations break down the internal process into manageable tasks performed by operatives in defined capacities all under a central regulation. It is argued here that by utilizing task demarcation through a bureaucratic approach to funerals, this strategy has effectively deskilled the overall work of the funeral employees in large firms in contrast to the funeral director in small organizations. In addition, there are other consequences for staff as a result of centralized operations.

Through task fragmentation it is clear that employees in large organizations are not exposed to the many and varied tasks that comprise the overall work experience of funeral directing. Funeral arrangers only have experience of administration; embalmers of arterial embalming and sanitary matters; chauffeur bearers of driving, etc. Whilst it could be argued that this has created the role of specialists in these tasks, the notion of the funeral director also having a comprehensive knowledge and portfolio of the other roles that represent the whole funeral as a complex event is not apparent as most employees are recruited directly and trained in one specific task, rather than progressing through a broad training. From the perspective of the client deskilling has several consequences.

In the classification of funeral arranger - particularly where the arranger is not a conductor (usually a female) - heavy reliance is placed upon second-hand knowledge



when advising clients during the course of the funeral arrangement interview. This is in direct contrast to the actual experience of having undertaken or even observed specific tasks. For example, advising on specifically required customs during an ethnic funeral ritual would be more suited to those who have had first hand experience of practical application. With increasing direct entry employment into one particular aspect of funeral directing, many funeral directors are without a uniform range of skills and knowledge. Evidence of this is provided by the exacting job classifications and descriptions of employees in the large organizations, such as the receptionist who solely arranges funerals.

In an occupation where ideally an altruistic philosophy of serving the client should prevail, deskilling can lead to a lack of understanding of the problems experienced by each fragmentation of work. Departments or individuals having little or no contact with the bereaved may not comprehend the difficulties evident from dealing with those who are experiencing loss. For example, the administration responsible for co-ordinating all resources may not appreciate the stressful nature of negotiating with the bereaved over such matters as funeral timing or when a body can be viewed as experienced by a funeral arranger. Clearly conflict can arise in such a situation as from the perspective of the client their funeral is the only one that is important whilst to the administrators it is one among any number being processed at a given time period. The degree of understanding essentially depends of training, appropriate experience and the personal aptitude of the employee.

Essentially, this lack of understanding of problems by employees in specialist areas - particularly the centralized administration - can be seen to result from being alienated from the overall system of operation. Where the funeral organization operates from a sole outlet staff have the ability to interact with one another as administrative and operational activities take place in the one location. Consequentially, there is a degree of cognizance of problems. However, where for example administrative employees such as funeral arrangers in branch office work alone it is possible to identify a degree of alienation. Staff in isolation (Blauner 1964) in the branch offices rely totally on the centralized operation for the fulfilment of all funerary requirements. Instructions are limited to oral and written communications. However, by only arranging funerals these staff are divorced from the complexity and experience of the overall process. They encounter and comprehend one aspect that comprises a complex and intricate mechanism. This isolation from the overall task can lead to a distorted representation of actuality. For example, unreasonable demands over the allocation of resources can be made by arranging staff upon administrators in the centralized office who are constrained by budgets. Further problems of isolation of staff in quiet branches can lead to motivational problems. Alienation from the overall process may well also lead to the pursual of alternative objectives - as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Deskilling also leads to the question: who is the funeral director? When dealing with the large organization the bereaved will encounter functionaries responsible for differing parts of the funeral. Whilst the conductor of the funeral is often termed the funeral director by the organization in addition to being perceived as such by the

bereaved, the arranger - an individual who collectively may well have had more sustained contact with the clients than the conductor/director appearing for an hour on the day - could also be deemed the funeral director. Both are specialists working in an expert capacity; the first as a director of administration, the second as a director of operations.

A further point relating to task fragmentation is the situation where employees are sufficiently deskilled - perhaps unskilled - enough not to make decisions. These can only be addressed by the managerial hierarchy. Consequently, this will give the organization a degree of inflexibility, for example, if a client wishes to negotiate over the cost of a funeral. In the case of the latter situation this can only be carried out if a manager can be contacted. In some circumstances the client may not be prepared to wait for a decision.

As mentioned earlier, these issues will be discussed more fully in the following chapter.

### Backlash - small is beautiful

Since the 1980s, a backlash appears to have taken place by existing independent firms remaining in the industry against the presence and behaviour of the large firms. Family-owned and managed firms have reinforced their independent status and have promoted the idea that a small business offers a higher level of personal service in contrast to the large organizations. In addition, a significant number of independent



firms have united to form a trade association (SAIF) specifically reflecting their trading status.

In confirmation of this development, it is of consequence to note that a trend has commenced of new independent firms opening particularly in areas - usually urban - where the large organizations already have a strong presence. A conclusion from this development suggests that new and existing independent funeral firms have capitalized upon the weaknesses of the large organization through giving an increased level of personal service, such as continuity between funeral arranger and conductor and a greater level of flexibility in meeting client demands in addition to competitively priced funerals.

At this stage it is interesting to review a cogently reasoned article by Saunders that appeared in 1991 where he advanced a six-year cycle of

"...disintegration [of the large group] and reversion back to small units..." (1991: 205).

His understanding was that this could be achieved through the following stages:

"[The]...large firms absorb smaller businesses, cuts out competition; rationalises staff, services and assets; increases the cost of funerals to cope with mounting overheads; injects a greater element of impersonality; message gets around to the public that this or that small

funeral director gives a much nicer funeral; future clients revert to small family business and the number of their funerals grows; more of the experienced managers, retirees and their offspring set up new small businesses to meet the demand and so drain away or draw custom from the larger groups. Result: large groups diversify to survive..." (Saunders 1991: 205-6).

Although at the time of writing (1996) six years have not yet elapsed, Saunders' forecast has been remarkably accurate. In confirmation of this prediction there is clear evidence to demonstrate that a significant number of new independent funeral businesses have entered the market during the last decade and a half. Although no statistical data can be produced, basic analysis through contrasting the firms listed in telephone directories of the early 1980s with those of 1994 reveals the presence of new independent organizations, particularly in urban areas.

The importance of the small firm operating in the funeral market serves to underline the sentiments of the Bolton Committee which reported in 1971;

"If, as we believe, the small firm is for many purposes a very efficient organism, with special advantages in the exploitation of new opportunities, it should be able to take advantage of the weaknesses and inefficiencies that over-concentration would inevitably produce in the structure of big industry" (Bolton 1971).

Although preliminary research seems divided on whether ownership is important to the service user (Hopwood 1996: 14 & Gould 1996), there is clear evidence to indicate the existence of a trend of new independent organizations opening in business. The prosperity recent entrants have experienced is likely to act as a stimulus for further firms to penetrate the market.

New firms in addition to existing independent organizations are keen to advertise their independent status and/or the fact that they are managed by a family or individual. Date of establishment and the number of generations the same family has managed the firm can be detected in publicity material. The name of the individual funeral director can be also found in advertising copy, such as

"Under the personal supervision of...[funeral director's name]".

In one recent advertisement attention is drawn to the fact that a new independent firm is "British" owned - a subtle identity tag in a heavily concentrated SCI locality.

Reinforcing the independent status highlights the strengths of the "family" firm as previously identified by Donnelley (1964: 97) with the firms operating around 1900. For example, family sacrifices are often made; important community and business relationships are forged resulting in a respected name; social responsibility is generated through awareness of local issues and finally by a dedicated internal workforce and a unified management-stock-holder group, continuity and integrity can be maintained. Of more importance, however, is that the independent and/or family identity of the



business clearly indicates the provision of increased likelihood of a personal service in contrast to the large organization. Examples such as continuity between arranger and conductor, flexible viewing/office hours and variation of funeral prices according to consumer circumstances are all aspects of an increased level of personalization in which the small firm can be contrasted with that of the large.

## Conclusion

During the course of this century the organizational structure of the funeral industry has been transformed. From the family firm operating in conjunction with the carriage master, societal, technical and economic developments have gradually given funeral directors the ability to capitalize upon the strengths of large scale operation. As a result, specialist large funeral organizations have emerged and grown through the acquisition of established small family funeral businesses that have experienced problems of survival as a result of the changing market environment in addition to succession. Although this has only affected a comparatively small sector of the industry in terms of market percentage, it is the approach towards the internal management of funerals by the large organizations that has dramatically changed the system of operation in addition to work of the individual funeral director. The centralized approach can be paralleled to Fordism, especially the employment of a production line system at the operational centre. It is through this system that large organizations can

achieve financial benefits as resources with high fixed overheads are controlled.

However, it is argued here that a centralized approach to funeral management has consequences for both employees and more importantly the bereaved. Utilizing bureaucratic principles such as uniformity, specialization and standardization achieves economies of scale but there is no evidence that benefits - financial or otherwise - are passed to the bereaved. It is further argued that issues such as continuity and deskilling have implications for all involved.

Furthermore, we have seen something of a reaction against bureaucratized funerals taking place over the last decade or so. The differential in ownership is becoming a key issue as greater consumer awareness of both types of organization takes place. Clearly independent status together with the presence of an identifiable figure whose name appears above the door is a marketable commodity. Essentially it is perceived to represent a higher level of personal service.

In parallel to these developments it would also appear that the reappraisal of funeral performance that has taken place in the last decade has resulted in do-it-yourself funerals. Although this reaction is extreme as the funeral director's services are not utilized, it is nevertheless a strategy that is achieving widespread attention. However, there is little evidence at this stage to indicate that such funerals are taking place on a widespread basis.

The long term implication of these and other developments we shall return to in our

concluding chapter. In the meantime we move on to explore in our next Fieldstudy chapter the practical ramifications of the major changes we have highlighted.



## Chapter 5 - Three Funeral Organization: A Field Study

### Introduction

Whilst Chapter 5 provided an insight into the operation of both a large centralized and small independent funeral firm, this chapter presents the findings of fieldwork research that examines contrasting types of organization. The purpose is to provide a comparison in terms of how the two types of organization manage funerals, firstly from the perspective of the client and secondly from an internal operational perspective.

The chapter commences with an overview of the research methods used to conduct the fieldwork and short descriptive accounts of the organizations involved. After presentation of the fieldwork a commentary on themes relating to the operations and management of funerals is provided.

### Research Methods

#### (i) Access

The writer's past links with the funeral industry led him to anticipate that access to firms would be relatively uncomplicated as compared to the experiences of Howarth (1993b: 224) and Smale (1985: 26). Whilst to a certain extent this did prove to be advantageous, past knowledge of the industry and more importantly current contact

with certain organizations could have been considered to carry potential handicaps.

Firstly, it was necessary for aims and objectives of the research to be stated categorically on the occasion of first contact especially with the owner of the small organization.

Secondly, in more pragmatic terms it was necessary for one organization to be sufficiently spatially separate from the trading area of the second organization in order to prevent accusations of conveying confidential information, such as funeral numbers, prices and contacts. If such an issue was not addressed in the preliminary stages of the research the discovery of a connection with a rival firm could easily have brought about a swift termination to further access to one or both of the organizations.

A problem magnified by the level of recent acquisitions was that it was also essential that the two firms selected for investigation met with the definitions of small business and a large centralized operation. It was especially apparent in certain geographic areas that the presence of the large firms restricted the number of possible organizations available. In respect of this, one organization was selected and after discussion with the manager access was granted. However, three days prior to the first day of fieldwork the firm was the subject of a merger. Contact was then made with the management of another centralized organization and permission granted to enter for the purposes of participant observation.

Whilst there was no need for a gatekeeper (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 63) in respect of this latter organization, one was necessary for securing access to the small

firm. Access came through the fortuitous meeting with a family member whose relation had recently established a business. Contact was made, the terms of reference stated and the access granted to spend time in the firm and conduct interviews. The fieldwork for both organizations was conducted during the period December 1994 to February 1995.

## (ii) Confidentiality

Beynon found that the researcher, Roy, "...always maintained anonymity of the organization..." as he would, "...hate any of them to read what I [he] had written" (Bryman 1989: 29). Thus confidentiality, neutrality and independence as a researcher was paramount for Roy. For reasons of confidentiality which have been already been outlined, Roy's advice has been heeded and the identity of each organization together with its employees has been preserved. The following descriptions have been adopted for use throughout this chapter in respect of the two organizations studied:

LFO - large organization

SFO - small organization. The owner/manager of SFO is David.

Suffice it to say that both firms operate in the south-east of England and neither is in the same trading area.

The two contrasting types of organization analyzed here are similar to the typologies utilised by other researchers. In respect of America, Pine's (1975) personal service and



bureaucratic models are similar to SFO and LFO respectively. Comparable organizations are likewise indicated by Habenstein (1962), whilst Naylor's (1989) study of funeral firms in Leeds offers a four-fold typology with the Centralized Funeral Home and the Crossroads Funeral Home similar to those discussed here.

### (iii) Limitations

It is assumed that in operational terms the two organizations examined here are representative of similar sized firms in the industry. To verify this assumption it was clear when investigating LFO in particular that centralized operational units existed in similar areas in the same firm. Certainly from other evidence, such as informants and personal investigation, comparable principles of centralization are pursued to varying degrees in organizations with an equivalent number of branch offices. Similarly, with SFO it can be assumed that their operation is comparable not only among those that have opened in recent years, but also existing and well established family firms.

### (iv) Research techniques

At LFO the role of participant as observer was assumed. Interacting with clients by arranging and conducting funerals, undertaking administrative duties and directing staff were all engaged in over the three month period. Running descriptions being unobtrusively recorded were maintained on specially designed documents each bearing the date, location and a reference number. Each sheet was then classified under a thematic scheme of headings and filed. Company literature such as procedures manuals, memoranda and work programmes were also consulted. In addition, many informal conversations with staff and junior management were held.

The research at LFO was not conducted in a covert manner and the majority of staff were aware of a researcher in their presence. Although the purpose of the project was verbally outlined to staff, it was unlikely that members of the organization fully understood and appreciated the rationale of the investigation. As the research principally focused on operational matters, the efficacy of the systems and procedures were frequently discussed. In this respect staff were only too willing to relate their experiences and incidents, particularly concerning problem areas or aspects of conflict. At SFO a contrasting approach was taken; that of observer as participant (Junker 1960). Whilst a welcome was extended to view the premises, converse with all staff, observe administrative procedures and attend funerals, no direct contribution was made to the execution of funeral-related activities. Surreptitious note taking was conducted at the premises and when attending funerals. However, when interviews were conducted at David's home a semi-structured schedule was followed and notes directly recorded. In both cases fieldnotes were written up at the first available opportunity.

The contrasting operational characteristics of each organization was apparent from the outset. Consequently due to the size and structure of LFO a greater period of contact was necessary than that spent at SFO. At LFO much more existed to be examined and from the perspective of the researcher the type of research role adopted at LFO assisted greatly in respect of this situation. Unlike SFO there was no necessity for research to be conducted under supervision and a considerably higher level of observer existed.

Towards the end of the fieldwork opportunity arose to examine briefly a third firm

which in structural terms could be positioned between the large and the small organizations. Like SFO, access was restricted to observation. However, presentation of the fieldwork is predominately drawn from the two primary organizations in which research was conducted over a longer period. Many of the findings in the third organization were similar to those in the small or large organization and the inclusion of this supplementary data is simply intended to enrich the analysis by providing a broader organizational and operational perspective.

#### Background to the organizations

##### LFO - Large Funeral Organization

LFO is one of a number of centralized operational units owned by a nationwide firm of funeral directors. LFO's formation is a result of a series of acquisitions that since the late 1970s have progressively been added to the original nucleus of five branches. Significant additions were made in 1987 and 1989; a more recent acquisition added four branches to the total. LFO now comprises sixteen branch offices all approximately within a five mile radius of the head office. Original trading names have been retained by each branch and no method of ascertaining the ultimate ownership of the organization exists. Visits to the branches revealed similarities in terms of decoration both internally and externally.

All the branch offices are located in "high street" positions and contain little more than an arranging office, a chapel of rest and toilet. Some also have a general office and



a small kitchen. A few premises have residential accommodation for members of staff whilst the remaining offices are "lock-up" retail units. The funerals are arranged and administratively processed at these locations. The staff are also responsible for selling memorial and pre-paid funeral plans at these outlets.

LFO handles between 2,000 and 2,500 funerals each year. Whilst some of the branches handle no more than 70 funerals a years, others encounter in excess of 300, with many being complex and demanding and requiring considerable local knowledge and technical expertise. A number of reasons indicate why the number of funerals managed by the offices varies so considerably. Location, competition, social composition of the area, price, degree of staff continuity, ability of staff, past investment in premises and fleet, examples of spoilt performance were all cited as contributory factors to the number of funerals the branch handled. It was clear that with some of the recently acquired offices the lack of investment had resulted in the some premises possessing a rather Dickensian air. Although these branches had in the past often enjoyed considerable success, it was apparent from visiting the office and talking to retained staff that little attempt to react to the changing social and economic environment had resulted in the present trading position. In view of this situation it is perhaps surprising that LFO had not closed certain units either permanently or by relocating the office.

A survey of the LFOs trading area revealed a mixed situation in terms of competition. Some branches were literally surrounded by a considerable number of funeral directors; in other areas there was almost a total absence. Where competition did exist it was usually a well-established independent firm. Only two new organizations were detected

in the trading area. Through acquisition the situation occurred of two groups of offices - each with different trading names - being situated in the immediate vicinity of one another. Funeral charges were the same at each branch office.

A total of thirty full-time members of staff are employed in an administrative (non-manual) capacity, including a managerial team of two. There are a further eighteen driver bearers (including the foreman) and two full-time embalmers. In the sixteen branches there are a total of twenty-two full-time employees. Nine of these are female. The vast majority of the branches are staffed by only one employee. However, the two busiest branches have a part-time receptionist and two funeral arrangers. One part-time conductor is employed and a further part-time funeral arranger and conductor.

As will be seen in the fieldwork, there is clear task demarcation at LFO which represents division of the constituent parts of the funeral into respective areas, each being managed and accomplished by employees in separate spheres.

Thirty per cent of the administrative staff have remained following acquisition of their employing organization by LFO. Just over fifty percent of staff joining the organization have had previous experience in the funeral industry. However, only eight out of the twenty-two have the Diploma in Funeral Directing (Dip FD), with a further two in this category possessing Membership of the British Institute of Embalmers (MBIE).<sup>1</sup>

The administration department has two full-time and one part-time employees (a

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<sup>1</sup>See Chapter 6 for information concerning these qualifications.

driver/bearer). The senior administrator has overall responsible for the day-to-day running of the office, co-ordination of activities, vehicles and manpower resources and producing the daily work programme.

The head office is located in an industrial area. No funerals are arranged here and it is from this operational centre that the branches are served. It is a large place with the air of a factory or warehouse. When visited on a number of occasions, depending on the time of day it was either very busy with staff engaged on cleaning vehicles, coffin preparation or bodyhandling or it was devoid of staff, vehicles and activity. Clearly, the funerals took all staff away from the building during the day, whilst early morning and early evening was the time for preparatory activities.

The head office has a large coffin storage area (maintaining a capacity of between 200-300 coffins) and workshop, garage housing four hearses, five limousines and three removal vans, embalming and refrigeration facilities (the latter accommodating 30 bodies). A staff rest room and locker room forms one half of the first floor; the large accounts department and suite of managerial offices are located in the adjoining area.

Fundamental to LFO's operation is the administration office, responsible for booking the funerals with the branches and co-ordinating the operations at LFO. It represents a "black box" as all information concerning the funerals flows to and from it. It is a pressurized environment and one that must be constantly staffed.

The managerial team at the head office comprises one manager in charge of the funeral operations and one manager in overall charge of the branches and head office. Beyond



this individual a pyramidal structure exists. Its assessment, however, is outside the remit of this analysis.

#### SFO - Small Funeral Organization

SFO was opened in May 1990. The owner and founder of the business is David and it is his full name under which SFO trades. David has been employed in funeral service for some seventeen years. His experience of employment with large funeral organizations considerably influenced his decision to establish his own funeral business. At an early stage David realised he was dedicated to his work but felt that the large organization was so large it lacked essential control of resources and standards were allowed to slip. It was also very disorganized. He found that commitment amongst the employees was low and their manner casual. Although job rotation existed between the manual tasks, pride was low. As there was no example from the management, staff were not encouraged to create a standard. In addition, wages were low and no incentives existed. Essentially it was the system not the type of work that created this apathy. David acquired no formal funeral-related qualification during this time neither does he intend to do so.

David's decision to open the business essentially stemmed from his belief that with total control of the operation he could meet the needs of the bereaved by providing funerals at a price lower than the competitors whilst maintaining a high standard. He believed that without effective control mistakes would occur that would ultimately destroy his future market share. He believed that the funeral was a show where the

audience (the mourners) comprise future clients.<sup>2</sup> If he stage-managed a good production through maintenance of a standard and a high level of personal attention the mourners are likely to remember this and utilise his services when a bereavement is experienced in the future. However, he recognised that achieving a constantly high standard would only be possible through personal responsibility of all aspects, thus necessitating absolute commitment to the business.

Thus David's move into the business on his own account mirrors the experience of the managers in Scase and Goffee's study,

"These managers are not dissatisfied with the work itself; it is the organizational conditions which frustrate them" (1987: 46).

In David's case the "organizational conditions" were the lack of controls to ensure the maintenance of a high standard of funeral performance. Similarly,

"Thus, business formation and growth is often not the outcome of exceptional personal capacities of drive, determination and ambition, but a function of various forms of personal discontent and random occurrence" (Scase and Goffee 1987: 33).

When David contemplated opening the business his first consideration was the

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<sup>2</sup> The analogy of the funeral with the theatre is one that has been developed by writers such as Smale (1985) and Turner and Edgely (1976).

location. After travelling around the area he found a lock-up shop in a small suburban parade of shops. It proved to be a key position. Located in a relatively highly residential area, three cemeteries and a crematorium are situated nearby. The main hospital for the area and Registrar of Deaths were within two miles, although the Coroner's mortuary is some distance away.

On visiting SFO's premises they were found to be small. The main client area consisted of the reception area and a small arranging office with a desk and two chairs. Adjacent were two chapels of rest. All administrative work was carried out in the arranging office. To the rear of the premises was a kitchen, toilet and storage cupboards. Behind was a yard with the recently built embalming room, beyond which was a steel garage containing the stock of about forty coffins of varying sizes and types. The embalming room was added two years after David opened the business. There is no workshop so coffins are fitted with handles and lined in the kitchen/passageway area.

David owns a secondhand hearse which is garaged about two miles away and brought to the office when required. He also possesses a fully-equipped van for removals - known in the trade as a "handy". He does not own a limousine and relies on the services of a local hire firm that possess vehicles of the same model as his hearse.

When David first opened the business he employed a manager to arrange and conduct the funeral. However, following the advice of a business consultant the manager was made redundant and David has assumed all these duties. Such a move brought increased control of the business, created more contacts and more job satisfaction.



However, whilst the departure of the manager saved wages, David's workload increased substantially. As the number of funerals increased David decided to employ an assistant who now performs all duties both administrative and manual. However, David no longer is in a secondary position as was previously the case as his present assistant has not had any previous experience of the occupation and David has been his sole mentor. It is doubtful that his new recruit will acquire any occupational qualification. David's staff for coffin bearing and removal duties are drawn from a list of part-time casual employees. A number are firemen who being employed on shifts are available during the day. Other part-timers are retired. All provide their own uniform and are paid in cash on the completion of their allotted tasks. When he needs manpower David simply works down the list to contact whoever is available.

Although David's wife has experience of the industry she does not work with him in the office. However, she contributes by typing correspondence, dealing with outstanding accounts, paying bills and routine administrative tasks; the latter being undertaken at home. She also answers the telephone at home when David has an evening off or is out on a removal. One member of the extended family is also involved; David's sister-in-law. She covers the office when David and his assistant are out on a funeral.

In the first twelve months of trading SFO handled 102 funerals. Since that date the numbers have steadily increased, standing at a yearly total of around 170. In respect of these figures it is worth considering the degree of local competition. In a five mile radius of SFO's office there were 26 funeral arranging offices. 73% of the retail outlets

were owned by large organizations operating a centralized system, the remainder by independent firms. It is perhaps interesting to note that all the independent firms - including SFO - have been established in the previous decade.

#### Supplementary evidence - MFO

MFO consists of a network comprising seven branch offices all within a radius of about five miles. Like LFO it operates a centralized system from the head office. However, the latter also doubles as a funeral arranging location. The head office possesses funeral arranging offices, a general office, management offices, five chapels of rest, a coffin workshop and coffin store, mortuary, embalming room, staff mess room and service yard. A garage for the two hearses, four limousines and removal vehicles is situated about half a mile away.

The firm handles in excess of 700 funerals a year. The head office performs the most funerals; some branches are almost disturbingly quiet.

MFO has one working director, a general manager and six male managers - all based at the head office. The latter contribute to the overall management in specific ways, such as stock and purchasing and memorial sales, in addition to participation in day-to-day funeral activities, such as arranging, conducting and out-of-hours telephone duties. All branches are staffed by female arrangers who do not conduct funerals. They fulfil a purely administrative function in addition to funeral arranging and escorting visitors to the chapel of rest. A full-time embalmer is employed together with nine chauffeur bearer/coffin fitters and a part-time typist/accounts clerk.

The firm has been in existence some seventy years. From a nucleus of the head office it has acquired three branches that it previously served in the capacity as a carriage master. The other offices were established in areas that were perceived as lacking in competition and with a high population of elderly persons.

Three branches trade under different names from the retaining organization. However, no secret is made of this fact and most advertisements contain both the trading name and that of the ultimate holding organization.

Taken as a whole MFO is located in an area of considerable competition. The Co-op, a very large nationwide organization and a number of independent family firms were also located in the trading area. Like LFO and SFO, MFO is situated in south-east England.

#### Preamble to the fieldwork

In the remaining pages of this chapter two sets of data are presented which contain evidence collected from fieldwork. The first set identifies and briefly describes the areas of contact a client will experienced with a funeral organization when arranging a funeral. Commencing with the first call following the occurrence of death, it moves through the viewing and funeral ceremony and concludes with areas of post-funeral contact. These six tables contrast how LFO and SFO deal with each stage from the



perspective of the client. Findings from MFO are also integrated into this section.

In comparison, the second set outlines the internal operational activities that commence in each organization when funeral instructions have been received from the client. With the exception of heading (1) which indicates the operational procedure at the first contact prior to the funeral arrangement interview, headings (2-6) detail the range of tasks that have to be completed upon conclusion of the arrangement interview. The data also identifies who is responsible for each task performed.

As can be seen from the headings both organizations proceed through the same stages to accomplish a funeral. However, it is the manner in which each approaches the accomplishment of each task that proves to be the distinguishing factor between the LFO, MFO and SFO, a factor ultimately reflected by the size and structure of the organization. In SFO, David and his assistant are responsible for performing the majority of the tasks that comprise each funeral. They are responsible for ensuring the tasks have been completed. In this organization the minimum degree of formalization is apparent.

In LFO and to a certain extent MFO, the aspect of task specialization is clearly evident. The driver bearers literally perform according to their job title in addition to bodyhandling and workshop duties. Similarly the embalmers and funeral arrangers and administrators participate only in these tasks. The main reason for this formality is due to the size of the organization, the complexity of operation and the number of the funerals LFO undertakes.

Set 1 - Data relating to the sequence of contact with LFO, SFO and MFO from the perspective of the client

**(i) Primary contact with the organization**

Funeral arrangements can be made at anytime following death. Although a death must be registered before disposal can take place, the five day rule appertaining to registration permits the commencement of arrangements before the formal documentation has been completed. To make the arrangements the executor or next of kin will have to go to the funeral director's office or the latter will visit a residence. With all three organizations it was found that the vast majority of clients do not telephone before they arrive at the office thus demonstrating the unpredictable nature of this service industry. The only exception is usually if a removal is effected outside working hours in which case at LFO and MFO the branch will be notified of a forthcoming arrangement upon opening the next working day by the member of staff organizing the removal.

**LFO**

From inspecting client surveys and information from respondents it was found that consumer loyalty was the most likely reason for clients to entrust funeral arrangements to LFO. All the branches had been established under the same trading name for many years and a reputation had been generated in the trading areas. Recommendations from those involved in the death process (such as hospital administrators, advice organizations, etc) were also a powerful force and one that was maintained through

non-funeral related contact.

Telephone quotations were regularly given out by the branches - particularly those with a high level of competition in their immediate trading area. However, it was clear that the organization did not always go on to make the arrangements and branch staff felt that the policy of maintaining region-wide price uniformity which ignored local competitor's prices was understood to be the reason for this. This consistent pricing structure was implemented as a response to the problems experienced by the staff on duty outside working hours. They would be unaware of the branch to which the caller was telephoning and therefore could not quote for specific branches.

Advertising (Yellow Pages, Church Magazines, etc) are deemed to help generate business. The purpose of church magazines is to keep in contact with the church and as many publish lists of parishioners' deaths they can be used to assess local market share.

## SFO

As SFO has been in existence for only five years, the likelihood of performing "repeat" funerals - that is funerals linked in familial terms to past clients - was considerably less than LFO. However, like LFO, recommendations from past clients to neighbours as well as from those in the death process contributed to the sources of work. The local Coroner's officers frequently utilized SFO's services for removals as his response time was extremely good in comparison to some - particularly large - firms in the area. David vehemently maintained that price was the main reason why he attracted new business. The first funeral in the price range was at a significantly lower charge than that of the



neighbouring large organization and in addition he supplied an enhanced grade of coffin in comparison to that of his competitor. He would often notice clients arriving with estimates obtained from other firms which was indicative of “shopping around”. Alternatively, the prospective clients used the term “basic” funeral - an almost exclusive industry-wide term for the least expensive funeral. David was also in the position and prepared to negotiate on price if the need arose. Although David advertised extensively at first he recently ceased all advertising with the exception of a single line entry in Yellow Pages as he perceived any greater outlay to be of negligible value in terms of work generation.

All of the above can be stated in respect of MFO except that as with SFO all funeral arrangers had discretionary powers concerning finance when discussing funeral arrangements.

## **(ii) Initial reception and funeral arrangement interview**

The funeral arrangement interview forms a contract to supply goods and services. Whilst it is a highly emotional time the arranger will attempt to put the clients at their ease by talking to them about the deceased person, offering them refreshments and generally attempting to create a rapport. This prelude can help prepare for dealing with sensitive issues broached during the arrangement, such as coffin selection, costs and viewing. However, such an introductory preamble is not always possible, nor desirable.

The arrangement interview will be conducted by the member of staff available at the branch. The arranger may not necessarily be usually employed at the office, especially if a male conductor/arranger is the branch executive, as the latter may be out conducting a funeral. A problem at a branch managed by one employee is that of interruptions from either the telephone or from personal callers during arrangement interviews. Although internal matters can be deferred, calls from prospective or existing clients and general enquiries cannot always be postponed and must be dealt with during the interview. At busy branches the situation can be extremely disruptive to the interview and frustrating for both parties.

In respect of the basic funeral offered by LFO, company policy requires the arranger to request full payment before the day of the funeral. In certain other circumstances staff are similarly requested to ask for payment of disbursements, for example in the case of the burial of a non-parishioner where the fees may be considerable due to a doubling or tripling penalty.<sup>3</sup>

## SFO

The arrangement interview at SFO will be conducted by either David or his assistant except when both are attending a funeral. In the latter circumstance both will rarely be away from the office for a disproportionate amount of time due to the close proximity

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<sup>3</sup>The distinction between parishoner and non-parishoner lies in the place of residence. This is particularly important in the case of burial as if a person residing at the time of death in one local authority jurisdiction is to be buried in a cemetery belonging to a neighbouring authority, an excess will be charged. This is often double or triple the parishoner fee. Its purpose is to act as a deterrent. It is not so frequently applied in the case of cremation.

of the crematorium and cemeteries frequented. Introducing herself as a member of the family, David's sister-in-law may commence the arrangements and inform the clients of the fact that David will return shortly to continue the interview.

By sheer virtue of the organization's structure and independence, the problems generated by interruptions are substantially reduced at SFO in contrast to LFO. Calls are largely generated by clients. When clients telephone to make arrangements and both males are on the premises the one not arranging will deal with incoming calls on a telephone in the back of the building.

Contact with the church, cemetery or crematorium during the course of the arrangement at SFO will be made directly by the arranger after referral to the work diary.

During the interview David requests that whenever possible the disbursements are paid before the funeral takes place. He does not require full payment of his charges prior to the funeral unless the deceased is to be repatriated.<sup>4</sup>

MFO was similar to LFO in virtually all respects. The branches were staffed by women; all funeral bookings and arrangements must be organized through head office; a male

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<sup>4</sup>Repatriation is the industry-wide term for the international transportation of human remains.



conductor is assigned responsibility of the funeral.

### (iii) Viewing

Clients will be asked during the arrangement if they or any member of the family wish to visit the chapel of rest. If the response is affirmative the arranger will either furnish the clients with a date and time or will advise them by telephone when the coffin is in the chapel. Viewing usually takes place one or two days prior to the funeral. (Clients wishing to visit the chapel are colloquially known as “viewers”). On the odd occasion arrangements were made for the coffin to be taken home for viewing purposes.

### LFO

Viewers will be greeted by the person working in the branch. Where branches are staffed by a female receptionist there is an increased chance of continuity between the viewer and the client than a branch with a male employee who may be out conducting funerals. Thus clients may not be greeted by the same person who arranged the funeral. This situation occurs in respect of one branch which does not possess a chapel. When viewing is requested clients are directed to a neighbouring office, hence being greeted by an unfamiliar members of staff. In such cases the clients will have to introduce themselves and state the nature of their visit. Dialogue concerning questions relating to the funeral was a difficult area as staff at this office would not be familiar with the arrangements and could only direct clients to contact the initial office for answers.

LFO permits out of hours viewing by appointment only and a driver bearer will usually

be organized to open the premises.

MFO is the same as LFO in all respects. However, it is interesting to note that due to the social composition of the area MFO dealt with a number of ethnic funerals where members of the family (of the appropriate gender) attend the premises to wash and dress the deceased.

### **SFO**

Clients visiting SFO to see a body will be greeted by either David, his assistant or David's sister-in-law. However, the latter seldom undertakes these duties as at the arrangement stage both males do their best to direct clients towards a suitable time when they know their presence in the office can be guaranteed. SFO permits out of hours viewing by appointment and David or his assistant will attend in person. No extra charge is made for this service.

### **(iv) Other areas of contact before funeral**

Apart from viewing the body, clients may have reason to contact the office for matters such as ordering an additional limousine, give instructions regarding musical requests or making alterations to the arrangements. Most instructions will be received by telephone, but others will be encountered in person, for example, when the client arrives to view the deceased.

### **LFO**

If a client contacts an LFO office during working hours, any queries can be dealt with as all paperwork relating to the branches funerals will be retained in a file for ease of

access. However, for the reasons stated above in (i & ii) it may not be possible to converse with the arranger. Unless the duty manager receiving calls outside working hours happens to be the person with whom the client made the initial funeral arrangements, any messages obtained out of hours have to be deferred until the appropriate office opens the next working day. With an excess of 70 funerals in progress in any one period, it is impossible for the duty staff to be familiar with all funeral instructions.

MFO is much the same as LFO, except that fewer funerals are handled.

## SFO

During working hours David or his assistant are available to receive calls. In their absence David's sister-in-law is available. Outside working hours the telephones are transferred to David's residence and callers will either converse with David or his wife. Files on each current funeral are taken home and information can be imparted or details received at any time.

## (v) The Funeral

The funeral is the climax of all the preparation undertaken by both the bereaved and the funeral director in the intervening days following death. The funeral director in charge of directing operations is termed the conductor - to use occupational parlance. As master of ceremonies he or she guides the bereaved over largely unfamiliar territory. Unruh maintains that

"There are two kinds of director. There is the band director who is up



front and very visible to the audience, and there is the theatre director who is hidden in the orchestra pit - out of view" (1979: 257).

Whatever the personality of the conductor, the key qualities of this role are attention to detail, empathy, sensitivity and leadership. Essentially these rest in the experience, ability and motivation of the individual conductor.

Whilst the funeral director is an important figure, he or she is only one individual who contributes to the performance of the funeral and its degree of personalization. The funeral is a time when third party individuals and organizations, such as the minister, crematorium or cemetery respectively actively contribute to the funeral. These functionaries and organizations provide their own definition of a personalized service to the bereaved - one which is outside the scope of this research. Whilst the service provided by the latter can significantly enhance or detract from the quality of overall funeral performance it is an area over which the funeral director has little or no control.

It is in the aspect of continuity between funeral arranger and conductor that a degree of personal affinity can be achieved. If there has been considerable contact before the funeral resulting in a rapport being generated the appearance of the funeral arranger can be of great value to the client.

## LFO

With one exception female staff are not permitted to conduct funerals at LFO. As

about 40% of the branch arranging staff are female a significant proportion of the funerals are relegated to appointed male conductors who will have had only marginal or often no contact with the clients prior to the funeral. When a male member of staff arranges a funeral, attempts are made for him to conduct the funeral. However, such decisions will be influenced by the availability of other members of staff to cover the office during his absence. It may be easier from the perspective of LFO to import a conductor from another branch or utilise the services of a conductor "working-over" from a previous funeral. In such a situation a number of conductors who were utilized to conduct especially complex funerals often at short notice expressed their dissatisfaction at not having prior involvement in the arrangement process nor having any background knowledge. An additional level of stress was generated in addition to a general feeling on discontinuity.

## SFO

David maintains a policy of the arranger always conducting the funeral. Unless prevented through extenuating circumstances, such as illness or unavoidable absence this practice is always implemented. In the period spent at SFO total continuity was present. Through observation it was seen that a high level of personal interest was taken in all the funerals. For example, a telephone call was made to the client a day prior to the funeral to enquire if everything was "going to plan". Although in general comparative terms SFO undertook less complex funerals than LFO, a number of thoughtful touches were apparent. For example, presenting cards from the tributes in a wallet, the offer of delivering the flowers and, in the case of a wife attending the funeral

of her husband, the suggestion that she retains the stem from the main tribute.

#### **(vi) Post-funeral**

In the days following the funeral scope exists for the client to have further contact with the funeral director as the relationship is not concluded with the disposal. The payment of an account, decisions regarding the disposition of cremated remains and enquiries regarding a new or existing memorial are examples of either personal or telephone post-funeral contact.

#### **LFO**

Clients receive a copy of the funeral account about five to six working days after the funeral. All accounts are generated at the head office but produced on headed note paper containing the trading name and address of each branch. A client survey and covering letter is enclosed with the account. All transactions such as credit card payments and the receipt of payment cheques through the mail will be sent direct the branch office. The address of the head office is not disclosed. Cremated remains can be collected from the branch office or forwarded via a courier service, such as Datapost.

Although LFO employs a dedicated memorial counsellor to interview clients with regard to memorials, most branch staff are familiar with the sales procedure.

#### **SFO**

The sequence of transactions outlined above in respect of LFO are equally applicable to SFO. The client personally calling to pay an account often provides an opportunity for thanks to be expressed or to discuss any matters arising from the funeral



arrangements.

## **Set 2 - Data tables relating to the sequence of Internal operations at LFO, SFO and MFO**

### **(i) The First Call (outside working hours)**

Receiving telephone enquiries when the office is closed. Calls will chiefly be confined to the following:

- a. Requests from a client, doctor or Coroner's Officer to remove a body.
- b. Requests for funeral price quotation.
- c. Requests for information about a funeral, flowers, accounts, general enquiries, etc.
- d. Internal calls from staff.

## **LFO**

When the offices are closed, all out of hours calls at LFO are dealt with by the duty manager. The telephone lines at all branches are transferred to the residence (above one of the offices) where the same member of staff handles all calls throughout the week. As there is no way of identifying the branch to which the call is being made, the duty manager cannot state the trading name and has first to answer the call by saying "Funeral service, good morning/evening". To ascertain the branch, the caller is requested to state the telephone number dialled. However, this is not always done.

When a body has to be moved the duty manager first contacts the two driver bearers at home who are on call according to a duty rota, and secondly, the manager who attends

out of hours removals. Details of the removal are faxed to the appropriate branch before it opens the following working day. Other calls are dealt with by requesting the caller to telephone the branch when it opens for business or by noting a message and telephoning or faxing it to the branch.

MFO handles calls outside working hours in exactly the same manner. However, MFO had considerably fewer calls than LFO.

## **SFO**

At the end of the working day the telephone line is transferred to David's home and dealt with by himself. In his absence his wife will answer the calls and will call him on a mobile telephone. If the call is to request a removal, David then contacts either his assistant or he goes through a list of part-time staff willing to attend removals. Enquiries concerning current funerals are answered directly as funeral files are brought home. Alternatively David responds at the first opportunity of return to the office.

### **(ii) The Funeral Arrangement Interview**

When interviewing the client the funeral arranger completes a detailed funeral arrangement sheet that becomes the central reference document for information relating to the funeral. The following areas are discussed with the client (not exhaustive):

- a. client and deceased details.
- b. preference for burial or cremation and the location.
- c. booking the date and time for the funeral.

- d. selection of the coffin.
- e. attending to more specific items, music, ashes, death notices, viewing, etc.
- f. signing the legal (cremation/burial) documents.
- g. completing and presenting the client with the confirmation and estimate of the funeral.
- h. recapitulation of outstanding details.

In respect of c), the following variables must be taken into account when booking the funeral: the requirements of the family; the commitment of the minister and church; times available at the crematorium or cemetery. (NB: this list is not exhaustive.)

## LFO

The employee working in the branch undertakes the arrangement interview. This may be the permanent branch employee at the branch or an "officer minder" whilst the aforementioned is out on a funeral or absent. During the arrangement the date and time for the funeral will be organized. To do this the arranger telephones the administrator at the head office. After making reference to the work schedule the latter makes contact with the cemetery or crematorium to secure a time. The administrator then reports the situation to the arranger who is still holding the call. It is essential that the funeral time dovetails with existing commitments and general booking parameters.

At MFO funerals are arranged in the same manner with head office providing the liaison between the branch and cemetery or crematorium.



**SFO**

All funerals are arranged by David or his assistant. If both are out of the office, David's sister-in-law acts as receptionist. However, when funerals are to be arranged she takes preliminary details, but David or his assistant finishes the process. Whoever arranges the funeral has to telephone the cemetery or crematorium whilst the client is in the office to book the date and time.

**(iii) The Administration of the Funeral**

When the client leaves the office the funeral arranger at SFO and LFO must embark upon a series of tasks ensure that all arrangements are carried out. This section details the administrative tasks at LFO that precede the manual tasks.

Tasks: (Paperwork and verbal communications)

- a. prepare and label a paper envelope file for all documents. (Not SFO)
- b. order any statutory documents, obtain a body size and enquire when the body will be ready for removal.
- c. arrange for an officiant to conduct the service and complete a minister's confirmation and mail it. A carbon copy is retained in the file.
- d. prepare confirmation for cemetery/crematorium and photocopy. Retain copy for file.
- e. order fees cheque for cemetery/crematorium from head office. (Not SFO)
- f. complete office diary entry and index.
- g. order floral tributes (if required).
- h. order catering/stationery (if required).
- i. construct death notice, insert in newspaper and obtain costing (if required).

j. complete and check administration details form and fax to the administration office.

(Not SFO)

k. ensure funeral NCR arrangement sheet is completed. Divide up and send bottom copy to accounts department. (Not SFO)

L. attend to alterations to instructions post arrangement and pre-disposal

M. follow-up and attend to outstanding details - often over a couple of days.

## LFO

These tasks are all performed by the funeral arranger. If some points are not settled or tasks performed "post it" notes are left on the file for the next person in the office to act upon. However, there is no standardized facility to notify staff of outstanding tasks or check they have been completed. Cheques can only be obtained from the accounts department which involves the arranger telephoning the details and the cheques being forwarded independently of the appropriate paperwork. Those offices without a fax have to give information over the telephone. Any alterations to the original instructions are noted on the documents and are telephoned to the administration.

MFO administers the funeral in the same way at LFO except that all administrative details are telephones not faxed to the head office.

## SFO

Whoever arranges the funeral at SFO completes all or the majority of these tasks, unless there are outstanding items which are followed up by David or his assistant. A check list with items such as "embalmer" or "papers sent to crem/cemy" is ticked and

dated when each has been completed. Only David or his assistant will perform this. They constantly check one another verbally or via the list. Only David can sign cheques. No internal documents are necessary for coffin fittings, etc. Therefore j & k are not applicable to SFO.

#### **(iv) Internal Funeral Operations**

##### **Tasks:**

##### **The Coffin**

- a. Fitting & lining the coffin; engraving and affixing the nameplate

##### **The Body**

- b. Removal to operational centre
- c. Embalming
- d. Encoffining

##### **Transport arrangements**

- e. Delivering the coffin to the branch
- f. Organizing the manpower and vehicular resources to furnish the funeral.

#### **LFO**

The overall co-ordination of the above tasks is the responsibility of the administration. On receipt of the funeral details, the administrators complete a register in addition to a triplicate NCR coloured pad. The first copy goes to the embalming department, the second to the coffin workshop and the third is retained in the administration office.

Dealing with each in sequence, the tasks are performed by:

- a. The chauffeur/bearers when they have returned from funerals often completing the



tasks on overtime.

- b. The removal is undertaken by one of two ambulance teams comprising two chauffeur/bearers who are permanently engaged on this task. Branch staff do not attend removals from a private house.
- c. The embalming is undertaken by one of the two full-time embalmers exclusively engaged on this task.
- d. The chauffeur/bearers encoffin the bodies according to the instructions of the administrators, embalmers or workshop/garage foreman. They are also responsible for placing a shroud or dressing the body using the clothing provided.
- e. The coffin is then taken in a van to the branch by the removal (ambulance) team or on the lower bier of a hearse when attending a branch for a funeral.
- f. The administration department have the responsibility for furnishing all vehicular and manpower requirements demanded for each funeral. They produce a daily work programme which is distributed to all departments, chauffeur/bearers and faxed to a limited number of branches.

With minor variation the same applies at MFO.

## SFO

Performed by:

- a. David or his assistant remove a coffin from the store. It is fitted with three pair of appropriate handles and the interior is lined. This is performed in the backroom area of the premises. David does not have an engraving machine so the names are transferred onto the electro brassed plastic nameplates with "Letraset" letters.

- b. Two of his part-time members of staff are utilized to effect removals from hospitals or the Coroner's mortuary. Occasionally his assistant is used. When a house removal is requested David usually attends in person.
- c. A free lance embalmer is organized to embalm all bodies. The embalmer has a key to the embalming room and usually calls early in the morning (7am).
- d. The body is encoffined by David and his assistant when they arrive at work. The coffin is then wheeled into one of the two chapels.
- e. Not applicable to SFO as chapel is on the premises
- f. David or his assistant organize transport requirements as soon as the funeral has been arranged. This item is indicated on the check list. The driver of the limousine will act as a bearer and others are organized as appropriate. If additional following cars are required they are obtained from hiring organizations in the area (only occasionally from other funeral directors).

#### **(v) The Funeral**

##### **Tasks:**

- a. driving vehicles and coffin bearing duties
- b. conducting

#### **LFO**

- a. The administration office produces a daily work programme detailing the assigned manpower and vehicles to the funerals. This is available to all head office staff the evening prior to the funeral. The work programme details the "work overs" from one

funeral to another. A group of branches in the same geographical area share a hearse with the driver who thereby becomes acquainted with the neighbourhood. He will also be utilized elsewhere according to need. The limousine (if applicable) will be selected from the six vehicles but these do not have a predetermined area of operation. All drivers also bear the coffin. The other bearers who comprise the team of four will usually meet the cortège at the church, cemetery or crematorium. However, at crematoria frequent use was made of the chapel attendant to act as the fourth bearer.

b. Company policy stating that whoever arranges the funeral also conducts does not appear to be followed due to the large number of female branch staff who are not conductors. A manager is responsible for assigning work to the conductors and for arranging coverage of the branch offices and apportioning the available staff to the funerals, irrespective of who has arranged the funeral.

Conductors receive an envelope with a photocopy of the funeral arrangement sheet together with the fees. The envelope also contains a report sheet indicating problems or feedback from clients. This is completed by the conductor and forwarded to the senior manager for examination.

With minor variations, MFO operates within a smaller radius than LFO. It was also found that with women in branches not conducting funerals the degree of continuity between LFO and MFO was lower.



## SFO

a. David or his assistant will take turns in driving the hearse. This depends upon who conducts the funeral, itself reflecting who arranged the funeral. The majority of funerals start in the vicinity of the office, which is familiar territory. If they start from an unfamiliar location a reconnaissance journey will be undertaken. A full team of four bearers always travel with the cortege. At the residence, in particular, this enables the conductor to spend time with the family whilst bearing staff load and secure flowers onto the vehicles.

No daily work programme is produced and all instructions to part-time bearing staff are given verbally.

b. David's policy is that the same person who arranged the funeral also takes responsibility for conducting.

### (vi) Post-Funeral areas of contact

a. Generation of funeral account and debt management

b. Disposition of cremated remains

c. Memorial work

## LFO

Tasks performed by:

a. The accounts department receive a duplicate copy of the original funeral arrangement sheet. Any additions or subtractions are checked with the branch before the account is originated. It is then forwarded to the client and a duplicate sent to the appropriate branch.

b. Cremated remains are collected by the chauffeur/bearers according to instructions passed by the branch to the administration. They are then delivered to the branch. The daily work programme carries instructions to take an urn or casket on the funeral, although in practice it is frequently overlooked.

c. When burials are undertaken in graves with existing memorials, the masonry department surveys the memorial and sends the client an unsolicited quotation for renovation and an additional inscription. The client must then contact the office to sign a contract and pay a deposit if the work is to be undertaken.

MFO deals with these issues in the same manner at LFO.

## SFO

a. Funeral accounts are typed by Ian's wife at home who also sends out reminder letters and maintains basic financial records.

b. Cremated remains are collected by SFO when they next attend the crematorium unless they are required sooner. They are often delivered by David.

c. SFO can supply memorials but clients must contact the office in the first instance as he does not chase up this niche market.

## Commentary on the fieldwork

As chapter 1 highlighted, the funeral is the ultimate rite of passage (Van Gennep 1960: 146; Grainger 1988: 117). Performance and ritual are prescribed by social and religious criteria together with personal preference. Whilst the funeral has a number of functions (Pine 1969; Raether 1990: 39; Warwick 1994) - primarily disposal of the body, release of the soul and social interaction - it is the former that essentially concerns the funeral director. Whilst from the perspective of the bereaved it is a complex social drama (Prior 1989: 155), to the funeral director the funeral is a highly intricate operation that relies on considerable input from many organizations and individuals.

Again, as discussed in chapter 1 funerals are also conducted in an business environment as the funeral director is employed to provide a service and supply goods. Combined with the experience of loss and taking into account the latter sentence it is not surprising that the funeral has been termed a "distress purchase" (Brown 1995: 163). Furthermore it is an infrequent purchase, especially when contrasted to the frequency utilization of other service industries, such as tourism or finance. Thus transaction costs can be seen to be high: constrained search time, an absence of local knowledge, the effects of grief and the impossibility of recontracting. These factors point to a major issue - that the service user has little in the way of a yardstick to measure the quality of the service provided in addition to whether the same service could be provided for less. These issues of quality and finance will be reoccurring themes throughout this commentary.



From the perspective of the client and as the first set of data identified, contact with the funeral director takes place in the interval between death and disposal. Commencing with the funeral arrangement interview, the funeral director is then charged with the responsibility of organizing the necessary tasks that culminate in the performance of the funeral. Once instructions have been received the operations that take place in the funeral director's premises are unseen by the bereaved, hence the problem identified in chapter 1 of the lack of "dramatic realization" (Goffman 1959: 40).

In applying Van Gennep's (1960) threefold perspective of the rite of passage to the funeral - and more importantly to the body - funeral directors are responsible for effecting the dismissal of the body from the hospital or place of death, undertaking the embalming in what can be seen as the transition period in preparation for when it re-emerges preserved and beautified for viewing or unseen at the funeral.

Whilst these responsibilities are essentially the same for all funeral directors, the fundamental difference, however, is the manner in which they are executed by the organization concerned. As the second set of data identifies, this largely reflects the overall structure of the firm. Funeral performance is the objective of all three organizations discussed yet their manner of execution varies considerably. In recognition of its size LFO and to a certain extent MFO, both maintain a centralized system that is formal and standardized and one in which staff operate in specialized roles. In contrast SFO does not have such prescribed boundaries.

From contrasting evidence presented in the fieldwork data it became clear that

distinctions existed in a number of areas in the way funerals were managed between the large centralized organization and the small independent firm. A number of areas and issues were identified where it can be seen that LFO in particular manages funerals in a manner that in comparison to SFO - and to an certain extent MFO - were detrimental to the overall quality of service given to clients. To the bereaved, however, it would be fair to state that such contrasts would be less conspicuous except in the unlikely event that they had utilized the services of a number of firms of differing operational structure on a number of occasions and therefore able to make comparable and informed judgements.

Under each of the following headings issues apparent from the way in which organizations managed their funerals are discussed. The first two areas essentially concern the level of quality of personal service; the third considers the issue of price and reputation.

### 1. Task specialization

By virtue of its size and structure, task specialization between the two full-time workers at SFO was not apparent. Whilst there were areas in which David's assistant had no exposure, such as finance other than that of issuing receipts for income, in all other aspects there was overlap. They both participated in routine funerals operations including coffin finishing, body handling, removals and washing vehicles, in addition to night-time telephone duties. The number of funerals handled and the lack of internal bureaucracy can be identified as the major reason for the integration of tasks.

In contrast to SFO, the degree of specialization and division of labour among the staff at LFO can be seen to be considerable. A feature of bureaucratic organizations is the division of labour where staff conform to a clearly defined sphere of competence (Weber 1947: 265). From the type of demarcation that existed at LFO it was apparent that the rationale was to disseminate the constituent parts comprising a funeral into sections that represent individual tasks or areas of tasks. Essentially, it represented work fragmentation. The process became discernible from the moment a client walked into the office to arrange a funeral as individuals in different locations equipped with distinct skills and duties acted to contribute resources that culminate in the performance of the funeral, as tables iii & iv in the second set outline.

Observation and interviews at LFO revealed a number of implications concerning task specialization.

Firstly, a problem emanating from the fact that most female branch staff do not conduct funerals was that their knowledge in terms of giving advice to clients about funeral procedures was less well-informed than conductors. Being in a position where they were not infrequently asked by the clients during the course of the interview about the arrangement and ritual during the funeral ceremony, the staff were obliged to refer this line of questioning to a male counterpart. In some circumstances lack of contact with organizations such as the cemetery led to incomplete and/or inaccurate information being passed to the client. Whilst all employees had attended funerals of family, friends, etc., it was found that few had ever been present at funerals handled by LFO.



MFO contrasted with LFO as female arranging staff had been taken as observers on funerals as part of their training. This enlightened approach was due to the training-conscious owner of MFO.

Secondly, and in conjunction with the above point, staff at LFO were recruited directly into the task in which they were found presently to occupy. Thus their wider knowledge of the occupation was restricted. However, among the male staff employed in the branches, a number had received previous experience in the occupation prior to arranging and conducting funerals. Invariably this was as a chauffeur bearer; in one case as an embalmer. However, for the females just over fifty per cent have received previous experience in the funeral industry exclusively as funeral arrangers. Thirty per cent of these had remained following acquisition of their employing organization by LFO. The consequence of this employment strategy was that only a few members of staff - again usually males - had a holistic overview and experience of the whole funeral procedure and system both within the organization and in the external funeral environment.

In addition to these aspects, it was clear that specialization also alienated staff from the overall process. Knowledge of only one aspect that comprised the internal management of funerals led to alternative objectives being followed. At times these were found to conflict with attendant implications for the bereaved.

Training appeared to be minimal at LFO (generally "sitting by Nellie" although conversations with some staff revealed that sometimes even this was non-existent) and

was invariably confined to the task for which the individual was recruited. Through only training employees in one particular task and not involving them in any of the other duties comprising the work of the funeral director, it is possible to detect a degree of alienation. Whilst it was accepted that a detailed knowledge of many of the tasks, such as coffin finishing or embalming was inappropriate for all employees, a lack of knowledge of important and related tasks, such as the centralized process could be seen as responsible for generating a deficiency in mutual understanding between staff involved in different tasks. For example, as the present administrators had been employed only as chauffeurs none had ever experienced dealing with the bereaved at the funeral arranging stage. A frequent comment by branch staff was that administrators were often unsympathetic or antagonistic to their needs. The former perceived that the administrators did not understand problems, for example the duress experienced when clients insisted on the specific date and time of a funeral or the stress of accounting for errors resultant from a breakdown in the system (see below). Conversely, the administrators deemed branches to make unreasonable demands on their resources knowing full well the constraints and number of branches to supply. From this lack of a complete overview of particularly the internal system it was discernible that conflict of objectives arose.

Alienation from the overall process was less of an issue at MFO. All staff at head office dealing within internal administration also arranged and conducted funerals on a regular or semi-regular basis. These staff knew the likely problems occurring at branch level as did the branch staff as initial training had embraced head office-branch communications. Nevertheless on occasions problems arose.

Whilst London (1976) sees that conflict in an organization is not necessarily undesirable, observation within LFO revealed that the type of conflict generated was of little advantage to the management of funerals. Overall it was apparent that as a result of task fragmentation, groups of employees sought to pursue objectives according to their own needs which did not always conform with those of the organization or more importantly, the bereaved. Perhaps the most significant example can be cited concerning the tension between the administration and branches when booking funerals.

The objective of funeral service is to satisfy the bereaved client's wishes. Instructions are received at the branch offices and staff negotiate the fulfilment of same. However, as the branches are organized centrally these objectives have to coincide with those of the administration and their constraints. At LFO two or three branches are assigned a "fleet" (essentially a hearse) and a column in the large diary in the administration office is designed to record the timings relating to those branches sharing the hearse. When one of the branches schedules a funeral through the administration the time is required to "fleet" around the existing work of the other branches; this generates the "work-over" - thus achieving the optimum use of resources. However, the variables involved in booking a funeral comprise encountering a number of organizations and internal and external clients all possess varying objectives. Thus finding a suitable time often results in compromise, but during the process conflict often arose. An observed example serves to illustrate this dilemma.

On a Tuesday morning a family arrive to arrange a funeral. They are flying to Canada



the following Tuesday morning and stipulate that they wish to arrange a funeral on following Monday morning. The crematorium have times available and the officiant is available all day Monday. However, the fleet is already committed all day and the administrator cannot draw upon the fleets assigned to other branches. The administrator also cannot hire additional vehicles as the designated budget for the month to permit such activity has already been exhausted. The funeral arranger emphasises the circumstances, but the administrator could not authorise additional expenditure. In returning to the family, the funeral arranger is presented with a situation where they will not acquiesce to the Friday nor pay a premium for a weekend funeral. Consequently, the family left the office to seek another funeral director. From this scenario a number of issues are evident.

From the perspective of the client their objective is the performance of a funeral before Tuesday. Similarly, the objective of the funeral arranger is to satisfy the client's stated wishes. However, in this case the arranger is governed by the administrator's objectives, which ultimately prevail. It is interesting that both have budgets to fulfil; the funeral arranger has a monthly projected target of funeral numbers based on historical figures, whilst those of the administrator concern (and ultimately restrict) the hiring of additional vehicles. If the administrator had hired a fleet the contribution to LFO's overall profitability would have been reduced although the branch statistics would have indicated an additional funeral. By not effecting the booking at this time confirmation is made of the principle advanced in chapter 4 where all expenditure is kept to a minimum. However, this profit maximizing short term policy has long-term effects. Clearly the clients became frustrated through their ultimately unsuccessful

negotiation and following their departure the risk exists of their experience being relayed to community members who may represent prospective clients. Thus the reality of such action can have long-term consequences.

It is necessary, however, to view this situation in a broad context as it could equally be the case that another firm of funeral directors - such as SFO - may also be unable to meet the demands of a similar scenario, particularly during a busy period. MFO were determined never to lose a funeral in this way and were willing to hire in all resources if the need arose. To MFO performing the funeral was necessary not only to prevent a competitor from acquiring it but also from future work that would be generated.

Whilst the above scenario illustrates that funeral timings at LFO are required to be "dove-tailed" it also denotes that the existence of groupings pursuing their own goals can result in conflict. The administrator has limitations over the number of funerals that can be furnished, yet the objective of the branch is to generate and secure a maximum number of funerals. However, it is clear that to fulfil all objectives and accommodate the funerals, compromise between all involved is at times necessary.

It is possible to consider task specialization from an alternative perspective. Although LFO creates experts in one discipline due to the size and diversity of the whole organization, outside the centralized region of LFO but within the embrace of the parent company there existed a resource in the guise of specialists in areas such as embalming or repatriation or funerals of specific social or ethnic groupings. In contrast to SFO where repatriations had seldom been arranged and exhumations had never

been encountered, as a whole the organization LFO was in a better position for staff to drawn upon colleagues with a broad range of experience and knowledge. Such fragmentation of the work of the funeral director and task specialization lead to a question initially asked by Habenstein in respect of a mass-mortuary in the USA: "Who is the funeral director?" (Habenstein 1962: 241). Although this issue will be discussed from the perspective of professionalization in chapter 6, it can be argued that task specialization in the centralized management of funerals has de-skilled the work of funeral directors in organizations such as LFO in contrast to SFO. Whereas both full-time members of staff at SFO are fully conversant with all operational matters, staff at LFO are not equipped with the same portfolio of skills and rely on others to undertake tasks and supply information - as illustrated above between the female arrangers and the conductors.

A final aspect of specialization was the lack of continuity between the funeral arranger and conductor. In the first set of data six areas were indicated where contact with the organization by the client was encountered. In terms of arranging the funeral at SFO, whoever had the first dealings with the client either in the office or on the telephone would continue to deal with the same family to the completion of the funeral.

Although between the time of making the arrangements and the funeral David or his assistant could not always guarantee to be present, efforts were made to ensure they were available when they knew the clients would be calling, for example to view a body. David insisted on continuity in respect of conducting the funeral and whenever practicable this was maintained. As SFO had been opened only five years David was



conscious of the need for a familiar face to be present in the community. He steadfastly held that familiarity of name and face can help create a rapport with clients and form a lasting impression of personal attention. A funeral director who established a new firm and contributed to the first MMC report (1987) confirms the problem of lack of continuity inherent with a centralized operational structure:

“...the bereaved met a different face at every turn at a sensitive time when it was important from them to receive individual attention”  
(1987: 36).

For clients dealing with LFO the above was confirmed. Such a situation is clearly bewildering - in the short-term this can cause the client to feel that many people are involved in the process and thus reduce the sense of personalization; in the long-term this can clearly affect reputation and perceived standards of service. Although no written policy exists to this effect, LFO management confirmed that where possible the arranger should ideally conduct the funeral. However, many factors influence and were found to frequently prevent this. For example, clashing funeral times as a result of a busy day or the staffing of branches by a female where continuity was not possible due to the fact that with one exception they did not conduct funerals. As the data in table 5 indicated, in such circumstances the client would deal with the same person during the pre-disposal stages then be confronted with a different person for the funeral ceremony.

Attempts had been made within LFO for the same conductor to be assigned a group of

branches and to conduct all the funerals. Arranging staff would then be in a position to advise the clients as to who could be expected on the day. However, this was not always known especially during busy periods and when funeral times clashed. Some female staff felt frustrated at not providing this continuity especially where a rapport with the clients has been developed. Similarly, conductors drawn from offices outside the immediate area of the branch for whom they usually conduct funerals considered the situation unsatisfactory due to the absence of any background knowledge. It was also clear that conductors imported from other area were also "doing the branch a favour" rather than conveying an altruistic service ideal.

Observation demonstrated that unfamiliarity with local facilities and procedures at churches, cemeteries and crematoria also lead to stress and the possibility of spoilt performance. One respondent - a hearse driver - recalled an incident when he and a conductor were sent at short notice to a branch in very unfamiliar territory. After they had collected the mourners the cortège became entangled in the town's one-way system. To escape from a third circuit of the system they led the cortège through a hospital car park and then headed for the crematorium.

The likelihood of fostering and maintaining a link with individuals and organizations in the community, such as the clergy as well as those in the disposal process was also reduced by the use of different conductors.

To assess the level of continuity at LFO the work programme sheets for a period of ten workings days were analyzed to detect the relationship between the name of the person

arranging the funeral and the name of the conductor. In 10 days 72 funerals were performed. It was found that the arranger and the conductor were the same person for 39 funerals, representing 54% of the total. The findings thus illustrate only limited continuity between funeral arranger and conductor for funerals undertaken by LFO.

Although the level of conductor-arranger continuity at the MFO branches was comparable to that at LFO due to the fact that the branches was staffed by females, problems associated with this issue that LFO encountered were less pronounced. As the operational radius was considerably smaller all staff had a greater chance of detailed knowledge of the locality. In addition to procedures and layout of cemeteries and crematoria, knowledge of routes, one-way systems and avoiding traffic calming provisions were all observed as small details that proved to be a distinguishing feature in particular between MFO and LFO.

## 2. Communications

The immense system that existed at LFO to manage funerals largely centered around a highly formal channel of communication. As the second set of data indicated, standardized documents were used to convey information. However, it was clear that although these communicated the majority of routine information regarding the funeral due to the complexity of the system, the administration department had problems coping with the communication of last minute changes and unusual requests. For example, if the funeral was deemed to be "straightforward" and there was an absence of instructions requiring specialized or personal attention, then the system



appeared to perform smoothly. ("Straightforward" funerals can be labelled as ones that coincide with a standardized format and timings determined by the administration. For example, four funerals in a day that "workover" from one to another, that do not require the hiring of additional resources and have no special requests.) However, where instructions were found to be complex or deviated from this standardized pattern, distortion in the communication was evident and likely to occur between firstly the branch and administration and secondly between the drivers, workshop staff and embalmers. It was usually at the latter stage where the problems became manifest, often requiring either last minute problem solving by the conductor or leading to spoilt performance. As an example, driving staff would regularly forget to check for items to be taken to branches, such as urns, wooden crosses, documents, etc.

A number of reasons can be identified as the reasons for coping with changes and special requests. Firstly, there appeared to be a severe imbalance of work between branch staff and the administration. The latter office is staffed by two full-time and one part-time administrators who are directly responsible for executing a considerable quantity of work. The major complaint aired by the administrators was that branch staff had no clear understanding of the pressure of their operation and the fact they were also responsible for fifteen other branches and the co-ordination of their funerals. Secondly, there appeared to be "peak" times when the administration office was visibly overstretched in terms of the quantity of telephone calls, problems to be solved and the issuing instructions. The main period was from about 11.30am on Monday morning until the end of the afternoon. The reason for this was due to funerals being arranged following deaths occurring over two consecutive when the death management system

was effectively closed. Thus many funerals scheduled to take place at the end of the week were booked on a Monday. During this peak period the administrators were constantly interrupted by the telephone ringing and operational staff asking questions as they attempted to organize routine tasks for existing funerals, such as removals and preparation of the following day's work programme. Long delays in the telephone being answered of ten resulted. Additionally, after an initial request had been by a branch made for a booking a considerable period would elapse whilst the administrator dealt with other calls, enquiries and then the booking. The latter invariably took place whilst the funeral arranger was in the office with the client.

### 3. Price and choice of organization

The first set of data contains information that is of considerable significance. In the descriptive accounts of the three organizations it was stated that SFO had only been established five years. Despite this short period of operation it has experienced remarkable growth in terms of the number of funerals performed. In comparison to LFO and MFO this situation raises a strategic question: why has SFO encountered such striking growth in such a short time if client loyalty and reputation are perceived as the main reasons for choice of a funeral organization?

David maintained that price was of considerable importance to his clients. As he had performed few repeat funeral and undertook only minimal advertising, David stated that "shopping around" was the reason why many clients selected his firm. Thus as noted in the previous sections, although clients may not have a yardstick to measure



the degree of standard and quality, the cost of a funeral can be compared more easily. This notion indicates that transaction costs are not always high and that "shopping around" is an increasingly important issue to the funeral director.

Empirical evidence suggests that it is only a small number of prospective clients who seek quotations. The first Consumers' Association report (WHICH? 1961) indicates that no respondents did this, however twenty-one years later (WHICH? 1982) some 6% "shopped around". Similar reports have suggested that a comparable figure (Foster 1987: 12; OFT 1989: 14) do so, whilst others "strongly recommend" (WHICH? 1995) consumers to compare prices. However, although David could not give a precise indication of the number of funerals that were gained simply on the issue of price, it was certainly significantly more than the percentages quoted above.

It is perhaps worth while restating that David's office was in an area of considerable competition - centralized organizations of long established as well as other new ones. A funeral price survey was conducted by telephone among the five geographically closest firms in SFOs trading area. All were asked to detail and quote for their basic funeral. Notwithstanding the specification variations of a basic funeral, SFO was the least expensive.<sup>5</sup> In comparison to LFO (although some way from the trading area), SFO was substantially less expensive. In further substantiation of the degree of "shopping around", the owner of MFO and staff at LFO confirmed the increase in telephone quotations over the last five to seven years. In addition, the owner of MFO stated that

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<sup>5</sup> The NAFD "basic" funeral (as detailed in the Code of Practice) includes a coffin, removal, hearse, staff and administration. SFO's "basic" included these in addition to a limousine and viewing facilities, although embalming was additional.



the manner in which a quote was handled - conveying empathy, willingness to listen and to give information, offering to send a price list, etc - all contributed to "winning over" the client. As with SFO, both MFO and LFO were located in competitive areas with new entrants who had appeared during the last five years. It could safely be said that in the past a number of these clients would have used the services of the established competitors yet chose the previously unknown firm of SFO simply on account of cost.

The issue of recommendation must also be considered here. As mentioned in set 1 no i, David undertook many removals for the Coroner as his response rate was good. Although he did not always gain the funeral this did provide initial contact with the family and the opportunity to leave his business card.

The increase in "shopping around" raises important questions for the funeral director. Firstly, the mixed reactions to barriers of entry as detected by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC 1987: 35) in terms of reputation and goodwill are confirmed. Price is becoming increasingly important as consumer organizations encourage the bereaved to obtain quotes and make a decision on price rather than past experience or reputation. Although this research only considers three funeral organizations, if the extent of "shopping around" is consistent in other areas where a high level of competition exists, consumer response to this recommendation is increasing, despite possible transaction cost.

Secondly, if the large organizations proclaim that economies of scale are achieved the

following questions is raised: why are the funerals supplied by firms like SFO less expensive? Three possible reasons can be stated. Either the organization's centralized operations generates significant dis-economies of scale or the economies of scale are retained as profits and passed on to the shareholder. Firms like LFO can probably charge more than new competitors due to the fact that their consumer loyalty is high. Although the number of funerals is reduced due to competition, high prices can maintain profitability.

### Conclusion

This chapter has sought to illustrate the operational differences that exist between contrasting types of funeral organizations. The purpose has been to examine how each organization approaches the management of funerals. From analysis of the fieldwork it was clear that the environment in which funerals were managed by LFO - in contrast to SFO - led to identifiable differences in terms of the quality of service given to clients. Not only was the lack of continuity apparent as a result of task demarcation, but problems were also evident from overall control of the funeral process due to the sheer size and complexity of the internal operation at LFO. For example, the centralized administration had difficulties in managing last minute changes which consequently led to spoilt performance as clients' instructions failed to be carried out. In contrast, a maximum of three persons were involved in such preparations at SFO and the chances of spoilt performance considerably reduced. Clearly, LFO experienced a number of problems in meeting client generated personal demands that did not conform to the organization's predetermined calculability of funeral performance.

Lastly, it appeared that funerals undertaken by SFO were generated by consumer choice made on the basis of cost rather than past experience. Whereas LFO and to a certain extent MFO relied on attracting clients through longevity of establishment and reputation of the trading name, this situation indicates greater consumer awareness and, as a result, increased "shopping around".



## Chapter 6 - Professionalization and the Funeral Director

My daily woman was grumbling one day that her daughter didn't speak to her any more since she'd married into the professional classes. What did her son-in-law do, I asked.

"Oh", said my daily woman. "He's an undertaker."

Cooper (1979: 98)

### Introduction

The desire for an occupation to be classified as a profession can chiefly be attributed to the degree of status and prestige such a conferment conveys. It is chiefly for this reason that occupations desirous of acquiring such privileges and enhanced social position are stimulated to embark upon the process of professionalization. Funeral directing can be numbered among the occupations seeking professional status and this chapter examines both why and how the industry has approached the acquisition of such status.

A number of writers on the occupation of funeral directing have tackled the aspect of professionalization. Smale (1985) in particular appraises the role of the trade association within the process and also an individual funeral director in terms of professional behaviour. Naylor (1989) and more recently Howarth (1992: 87) critically examine the occupation against the traditional characteristics of professionalization; the latter attributes embalming to be a pivotal factor in the process.

With an American organization owning a section of the UK funeral industry it can be

considered perhaps worthwhile assessing the issue of professionalization of the American funeral director. This subject appears to have been a preoccupation of a significant number of writers. Bowman (1959), Habenstein (1962), Porter (1968), Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1972), and particularly Pine (1975), Farrell (1980), Kearl (1989) and Thompson (1991) are all fruitful sources.

The sociology of professions together with the professionalization process are complex issues. In order to appreciate these difficulties this chapter commences with a discussion concerning the problems surrounding the definition of both a profession and the process of professionalization. As will be highlighted, an important issue is why the occupation considered the need to embarked upon the process. This is discussed in the second section whilst that which follows discusses ways in which the occupation has attempted the acquisition of professional status and the importance of embalming in the process.

It is important to note that the objective of this chapter is not to arbitrate as to whether funeral directing is or is not a profession, but essentially to examine why the occupation embarked upon professionalization and how it has sought to accomplish this objective.

## Professions and Professionalization: The problem of definition

The debate over the definition of what constitutes a profession pervades most literature on the subject. In simplistic terms, Millerson (1964b: 16) points to the confusion over popular usages of the word. For example, a professional (full-time employed) as opposed to an amateur sportsman.

Similarly if a task is well done it is referred to as a professional job. At the time of writing (1996) a notice has appeared on the London Underground network discouraging donating to "professional" beggars. Central to the theoretical problem of definition is the lack of agreement as to the characteristics of a profession. For many years this has been expressed as: what attributes does a profession have that a nonprofession does not have?

Friedson (1983: 21) points out that the problem of definition goes back as far as 1915. In the 1950s and 1960s the problem of definition led writers on the sociology of occupations to examine the "free professions" (Hughes 1958: 132) - medicine and the law - and to utilize their characteristics as a benchmark for assessing other occupations. Consequently, these archetypal professions have come to frame much literature and analysis. The traits of these occupations have resulted in conceptualized models both for defining a profession as well as the process of professionalization.



Occupations such as medicine and law have been able to retain their professional status through adherence to values such as their pillar of the community image and - particularly medicine - an altruistic commitment to an ideal. However, they have also occupied a monopoly position in being providers of an exclusive utility and thus in possession of considerable power.

Greenwood (1957) can be cited as an example that identifies the characteristics that a profession will possess by the formulation of a theoretical ideal-type model. Five areas can be identified: (i) a basis of systematic theory; (ii) authority recognised by the clientele of the professional group; (iii) broader community sanction and approval of the community; (iv) a code of ethics regulating relations of professional persons with clients and colleagues; (v) a professional culture sustained by formal professional associations. Similarly, in terms of the process of professionalization, Wilensky (1964) provides a "temporal sequence of professionalization" which moves through the "life history" of the occupation. The sequence is given below:

- a. Full-time activity in the performance of a bundle of necessary tasks.
- b. Establishment of a training school.
- c. Formation of a national professional association.
- d. Redefinition of the core task, giving dirty work over to subordinates.
- e. Conflicts between the home guard and the profession-orientated newcomers.
- f. Hard competition with neighbouring occupations, especially at the later stages of professionalization.

g. Political agitation in order to win support of law for protection of the job territory and its prerogatives.

h. Rules and ideals embodied in a formal code of ethics.

Habenstein (1970: 105) states that with the exception of (a) all the above criteria have plus and minus valences. Correspondingly, the appropriate use of such model is to evaluate the degree of professionalization - that is the extent to which an occupation possess the characteristics of a profession after passing through the above process. As Greenwood states:

"We must think of the occupations in society as distributing themselves along a continuum" (1957).

The purpose of Wilensky's model is to suggest the sequence of events that an occupation must pursue to be designated as a profession. In a similar vein Caplow (1954: 139-40) maintains that this "natural history" sequence should commence with the formation of a professional association which then becomes central to the progress of professionalization. A change of name or occupational description, the construction of a code of ethics and the political agitation for legal constraints on who may or may not perform a service would then emanate from the professional association.

Alternatively, some writers such as Farrell have advanced a single statement definition of a profession, the following being one among many:

"A profession is an occupation in which people use specialized knowledge to perform an exclusive service, and for which they receive occupational autonomy, income, status and powers, including the power to set standards of admission and practice" (Farrell 1980: 152)

The 1970s marked a watershed in definitions and comparative models of professions and professionalization. The reappraisal of the discipline essentially recognized a number of problems (Dingwall 1983:11). The main problem is that of definition. Pavalko (1971) argued that professionalization models are heuristic and that quite simply,

"A work group exhibiting all of these characteristics does not exist"  
(Pavalko 1971: 25).

This explanation was largely due to the fact that considerable reliance has been placed upon comparing the occupations under analysis against the characteristics of medicine and law; Abbot and Wallace (1990: 2) term this as "unhelpful". The use of trait models gives too much of an idealized view of what a profession should be. Any that do not positively parallel with these traits are dismissed. Thus many aspiring professions are excluded. As Abbott and Wallace note:

"Trait theories...give tacit support to the views which those professions



project of themselves to the public. They tend to obscure the middle-class nature of codes of ethics and the way in the which the professions also acts as agents of social control" (1990: 3).

Millerson (1964a) reviewed twenty-one authors striving to define a profession and found that there was not one common denominator. However, he did identify a number of more frequently occurring items.

In one of a number of major critiques of professions and professionalization that appeared in the 1970s, Johnson (1972: 23) assesses that use of the trait model (such as Greenwood) or a functionalist type of analysis both have difficulties. For example analysts using the trait model have often done so with their own occupations in mind (Johnson 1972: 24). Pavalko (1971: 27) points firstly, to the "impressionistic" and subjective nature of data about professions and secondly to the lack of weight which is required to be attributed to each dimension. He notes that some writers stress the importance of certain characteristics to the detriment of others. Pavalko (1971: 27) also alludes to the bias from using professions - usually free professions - with a high intellectual technique and specialized training which correspondingly distorts the equation when considering other occupations. Millerson asserts that this type of analysis leads to a "false image" (1964b: 16). Most importantly it does not give enough flexibility for changing circumstances. For example, whereas professionals tend to work in private practice a significant number are now employed in bureaucratic organizations. Similarly, nowadays they are not always confined to the client-

professional relationship and that training does not always have to be institutionalised.

However, Millerson does imply that certain principles must be prevailing. For example,

"...whilst an organized occupation is not automatically a profession...a substantial theoretical foundation must be present" (1964b: 16).

He also notes that some occupations require more regulation than others thereby dismissing the necessity of a code of practice, although no example is cited. Whilst Millerson saw the relevance of the occupational association as important in the process of professionalization, he recognised that ultimately the perception of a profession is determined in the public's mind - perhaps the crux of the whole arena of professional status.

The shift away from trait theories has led to objective analysis of occupations such as personal service industries (Halmos 1971), for example, nursing and social work. Halmos (1971) points to the trend of personal service workers having virtues that are morally sanctioned and possessing professionally approved techniques, for example, a nurse exhibiting sympathy (Halmos 1971: 584). The latter sees the recruitment of specialists performing tasks once in the remit of society as a product of our age.

Prevailing theoretical ideas on the subject reject definitions and models in favour of more interpretive analysis. For example, Friedson (1986) looks at professionalization in practice, whilst Abbott and Wallace argue that

"...a more fruitful approach is to examine the ways in which occupational groups make claims to be professions" (1990: 4).

In the writing of Hughes he asserts

"...in my own studies I passed from the false question, "Is this occupation a profession?" to the more fundamental one, "What are the circumstances in which people in an occupation attempt to turn it into a profession, and themselves into professional people?" (1958).

Clearly, from this latter statement Hughes recognised the need to examine why occupations seek to professionalize rather than an arbitration of whether an occupation is a profession or not, due to the deficiency of one definition. Despite this situation occupations appear not to be deterred from embarking on a process of professionalization to achieve the perceived privileges.

The pressure to professionalize

As the introduction to this chapter indicated, the primary reason for an occupation to professionalize can be attributed to the degree of status in the eyes of society together with those experiencing contact with the occupation. For funeral directing the



acquisition of professional recognition can be seen to be an important objective if not a preoccupation.

Professionalization is a continually evolving and developing process. As the previous section indicated the concept is without precise definition and just as occupations change and develop so too do the reasons and the need to seek professional status. Whilst a number of initial reasons can be identified, developments occurring during the ensuing life-history of the occupation may necessitate reaffirmation or refocusing of the professional objective. Although this thesis predominately considers change within the funeral industry during the 20th century, for the reason just outlined it is necessary to consider the work of the undertaker operating in the latter part of the previous century to locate primary evidence of the desire to professionalize. Similarly, it is also necessary to consider changes occurring to the occupation during this century which can be seen as reaffirmation of the need for professional recognition.

Four specific areas can be attributed to the desire for the funeral industry to embark upon professionalization. Each is critically discussed below;

- (1) distancing from unscrupulous behaviour and myths;
- (2) the increasingly complex funeral and disposal environment;
- (3) relations with allied occupations;
- (4) stigmatization - bodyhandling and the economic environment of funeral directing.

(1) Distancing from a legacy of unscrupulous behaviour and myths

Richardson (1988: 272 & 1989: 113) argues that undertakers in the 18th century contributed towards occupational professionalization through supplying strong coffins which in turn deterred graverobbing. Thus the public could see that undertakers were acting in their own interests. However, it is evident that by the 19th century the funeral industry had acquired an unsavoury reputation which was largely based upon alleged financial corruption. As Litten notes:

"The trade in the nineteenth century does not stand up to close examination. In the main they were a semi-educated band with neither trade nor union affiliation, and greedy - the occasional client was brought to financial ruin by undertakers charging over-inflated and extortionate prices for an unnecessary spectacle that few could either afford or understand" (Litten 1991: 31).

It is clear from this statement in addition to further evidence (Morley 1971: 19) that a proportion of the industry - the Dismal Trade as it came to be known - exploited the vulnerable bereaved. Although chapter 2 outlines that such charges could not be levelled against the whole of the industry, those operating in urban areas were particularly responsible. In addition, some of the misconceptions and myths concerning

funerals and particularly the practice of cremation still in existence today (Davies 1995: 22) appear to have their roots in 19th century practices. For example, the removal of a body from a coffin before cremation. The latter necessitates the advertisement of a clear code of professional behaviour.

In the 20th century the industry continues to require a mechanism to distance itself from the behaviour of unconventional funeral directors. Errors and/or mistakes occurring within any organization relating to death or disposal are prone to media scrutinization irrespective of the accuracy of attribution. Goffman (1963: 40) points out that when individuals or organizations with a particular stigma fall foul of the law or attract welcomed publicity they are castigated with relish. With professional recognition society looks to those who have control of offending members to protect the public and enforce appropriate disciplinary sanctions.

By the end of the 19th century, however, there is evidence to show that some undertakers realised the necessity of departing from this image. The underlying objective was clear - recognition of the need to improve the image of the industry. As Cottridge notes;

"...a growing section of undertakers...[have sought] to cut themselves off as completely as possible from the bad old traditions of their class, and to endeavour to create in our own generation a new and better



type of public service such as will entitle them to the recognition and protection afforded to other professions" (1933: 132).

From this statement it is clear that these undertakers were anxious to depart from an industry besieged with allegations of corruption and poor ethical practices. In order to elevate the status in the eyes of the bereaved, undertakers looked to professionalization and the necessity of refocusing on the whole nature of the utility being provided.

In conjunction with the increasing complexity of funerals - as discussed in (2) below - this shift from merely selling goods to providing a necessary service in an altruistic framework became the prevailing objective. No longer was the undertaker merely a purveyor of goods and the means of transportation but a specialist service provider. Being recognized as a professional is perceived by the industry as a means of elevating the image by demonstrating severance from unprincipled connections.

## (2) Increasing complexity in the environment of disposal

During the 19th century the funeral and disposal process changed significantly. As chapter 2 indicated, the rise of the proprietary cemetery challenged the Established Churches' monopoly on burial (Jupp 1993). With this shift the entrepreneurial joint

stock cemetery companies offered an increasingly wide range of graves and facilities. Burial legislation emerged, regulating interment and the operation of these private organizations. In addition, the legal framework surrounding registration of death increased around this time and although cremation did not appear as an alternative to earth burial until the end of the 19th century and legislation in 1902, the compound result was a specialist arena of disposal authority.

For the undertaker operating around the turn of the century - and particularly those located in urban areas - this increasing complexity of the environment of disposal necessitated possession of a considerable body of knowledge of both law and practice. Individual cemetery regulations and growing bureaucracy through legislation required the undertaker to be in a position to advise the bereaved competently and thoroughly. Although the undertaker was utilized to carry out virtually all funerals, as gatekeepers to a specialist knowledge base they became exclusive intermediaries between the bereaved and those responsible for the ultimate disposal of the dead. As other responsibilities were gradually acquired this century, such as care of the body, it is appropriate that a all-embracing definition of the role of the funeral director has come to be offered by the National Association of Funeral Directors:

"...technical adviser, agent, contractor, master of ceremonies and custodian of the dead (MFD: 1988).

Thus the management of funerals became a technical and specialist function that

legally takes the form of a contract. The role of the undertaker therefore changed from merely selling or hiring of goods, to offering a complete service which essentially represented the overall direction and responsibility of funeral performance. Farrell (1980: 148) detects this shift through similar causes as a significant step in the professionalization of the American funeral industry. It is certainly this change through increasing complexity that can largely be attributable to the renaming of the occupation from undertaker to funeral director as will be discussed later in this chapter.

The growing complexity of funerals had other effects on the undertaker/funeral director. In organizational terms urbanization led to an increasing number of deaths to be managed and organizational intricacy of operation demanded increased managerial and co-ordination skills, for example by carriage masters supplying resources to small firms of undertakers. The economic and efficient allocation of such resources has to be carefully regulated to avoid errors and not meeting commitments. In this respect there is also evidence to show an increase in the number of undertakers beginning to specialize in funeral directing. Exclusive activity in one occupation signified not only sufficient trading demand but also a commitment to the occupation especially if investment in capital goods was involved. Again this particularly applies to the urban areas where there is clear evidence to denote a decline in the number of non-core activity undertakers. Harries-Jenkins (1970: 79) attributes the rise of full-time status as resultant from the overall necessity of an occupation.



As further societal and technical developments have occurred during the 20th century so too have different areas of funereal complexity. Although the acquisition of responsibility for care of the body will be discussed in (4a) below, it is societal changes such as the emergence of ethnic groups with funeral demands in contrast to traditional rituals that have had an impact upon the work of the funeral director. In encountering these groupings, funeral directors have had to respond to their needs by providing goods and services that conform to the seemingly bewildering parameters of law and regulations that now surround disposal of the dead. In addition, the increase in repatriations have led to specialist organizations taking responsibility for the management of these complex operations. Thus the desire to seek professional status can be seen to stem from the opportunity presented to the undertaker/funeral director to become an expert service provider.

The increasing complexity of the disposal environment has led the undertaker to possess great power and control over the system of funeral management. Control of the body can be attributed to the source of this power (Howarth 1993a). The provision of custody and the application of a scientific preservative craft in the form of arterial embalming has reaffirmed the definition of the funeral director to include custodian of the dead. Whilst this has given the occupation justification to its claims for professional recognition, it can however be argued that control hinders professionalization. Walter argues the body is

"...the key to commercialisation and professionalisation of death..."

(1994: 17)

Walter further argues that funeral director's share Illich et al's (1977) phrase associated with physicians of being a "disabling profession". Whilst possession of the body is seen to be the locus of control it nevertheless prevents mourners from becoming actively and fully involved in ritual preparation. He further argues that repossession of the body will facilitate the regaining of funereal control. If the funeral director is to maintain the quest for professional recognition and still possess a measure of control over the funeral, the role may well have to change to that of facilitator rather than director. However, whilst this may apply to those desirous of performing a DIY funeral, as the vast majority of funerals are undertaken by funeral directors they continue to provide a necessary and indispensable service.

### (3) Relations with allied occupations

Through the increasing complexity of funerals and responsibility for the undertaker/funeral director, it is clear that the latter has greater involvement with two occupations already acknowledged to be professions; medicine and the Church.

During the nineteenth century undertakers would have had comparatively little

occupational proximity with physicians. As the undertakers had minimal contact with bodies there was no common ground for meeting. However, Morley (1971: 24) alludes to irregular financial transactions occurring between undertakers and physicians when recommending clients. As the legislative formalities surrounding death certification and disposal - especially cremation - increased, scope for communication was augmented particularly when funeral directors became responsible for the provision of custody.

The Church has also played a central role in death and funerals and although their power decreased - for example the physician replacing the clergyman at the deathbed and the emergence of proprietary cemeteries in the 19th century - their role at the funeral ritual is still of strategic importance. In the case of the latter, funeral directors have an obligation to contact Church of England clergy to perform funerals for those professing allegiance to this denomination (Rowell 1977). The undertaker/funeral director would be responsible for securing the services of a cleric and in effect the funeral director - occupying the role of master of ceremonies - would hand over control to this functionary at the time of the funeral.

In working alongside two occupations that appear to continue to have a high degree of professional status, the funeral director occupies an almost subservient and possibly inferior role. Although pertaining to funeral directors in America, Porter's observations could well apply in this country:



"There is also some indication that the inordinate number of contacts of the funeral director with two recognized categories of professionals, the minister and the physician, contributes to his feelings of inferiority and increased his desire for comparable status" (1968: 39).

In addition, funeral directors are having an increasing link with solicitors, for example in the payments of accounts, the swearing of statutory declarations for certain formal transactions and increasing necessary for knowledge of specialist and general legal matters.

It is worthy of note that other funeral-related occupations such as the managers of cemeteries and crematoria were also anxious to gain professional recognition around the early part of this century. Although there is no evidence to suggest that dialogue took place between funeral directors and cemetery/crematoria registrars, both have parallel reasons to seek professional recognition and appear to have pursued the quest in a similar manner.

#### (4) Occupational stigmatization - bodyhandling and the economic environment of funeral directing

In chapter 1 mention was made of the ambiguous role of the funeral director and a number of reasons were identified as responsible for this. In part it was advanced that

funeral directors experience stigmatization on two accounts. Firstly, through proximity and contact with the dead body and secondly, through the financial environment in which funerals are managed. Both are discussed here in the context of surmounting stigmatization through seeking professional status.

#### a. Bodyhandling

As chapter 3 discussed, the undertaker operating around 1900 encountered comparatively little contact with the dead body. The body rested in the house of the deceased or on occasions was taken to a public mortuary. The undertaker's duty to the body was essentially restricted to coffin provision; elementary sanitary care for the body was provided by the neighbourhood laying-out woman. From the 1920/30s, however, a shift occurred in the place of reposition as undertakers in urban areas in particular increasingly provided chapels of rest. This area of supplementary responsibility gave the funeral director further ability to provide facilities and services; the chapel of rest and embalming. Whilst it can be seen that supply of these services gave the funeral director the impetus to professionalize, it is argued here that the responsibility of bodyhandling has caused the funeral director to become stigmatized. Consequentially professionalization is recognized as a technique to overcome such tainting.

As the latter part of chapter 2 indicated, the increase in responsibility for care of the dead can be seen as part of what Clark terms the wider "professionalization of death" (1982: 8) in society. As care for the dead passed from the local, informally organized

laying-out female to the commercial services environment dominated by the male funeral director and/or embalmer a degree of this "professionalization of death" occurred. This development is seen by Abbott and Wallace as confirmation of a process in which

"...the male-dominated professions gain control over and subordinate female-dominated occupations" (1990:3).

Abbott and Wallace argue that a similar situation occurred in the professionalization of nursing when:

"...male midwives (obstetricians)...claim[ed] to have scientific knowledge and technical expertise not possessed by female midwives" (1990: 18).

These laying-out women were honoured (Chamberlain and Richardson 1983: 39) and respected by the community. However, through the institutionalization of the dead in the commercial environment - as detailed in chapters 2 and 3 - and in conjunction with the prevailing attitudes towards the dead body as a source of pollution and contamination, the occupation of funeral directing has become stigmatized. Grainger points to the people carrying out body-handling tasks and

"...dealing in an official way with those aspects of life and death that



society has structured itself specifically to avoid" (1988: 142).

Charmaz (1980: 182) and Sudnow (1967: 51-64) speak of the "taint of death" and Fulton (1961: 322) of the funeral director being "unclean". (It is interesting to note that stigmatization appears to also apply to those employed in the funeral industry without direct contact with dead bodies. (For the example of a gravedigger - see Terkel (1974: 416) and Saunders (1995)). Goffman sees stigma as a characteristic that sets people apart from full social acceptance: "...an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (1963: 13).

In respect of funeral directors, Harrah and Harrah express the occupational dilemma in graphic terms:

"Funeral Directors do the dirty work that literally 99% (or more) of society would not do. They perform an absolutely vital service. Society might be grateful. Instead, it heaps abuse on him or her, higher than on sanitation workers, pornographers, or child molesters. Why?

People tolerate (more or less) pollution, dirty pictures and rape because they think they can escape them. But death defying, death-denying syndromes notwithstanding, deep down, everyone knows he's going to die and he doesn't like it.

Funerals remind him he's mortal. He doesn't like to shake hands with a mortician" (1976: xi).

The unease that results from this attitude underlies the stereotypical image - either comical or corrupt - of the funeral director. Popular culture as dramatised in the fiction of Waterhouse (1959) and Orton (1967) and augmented by television serials like "In Loving Memory" and the film "Thats Your Funeral" have reinforced this image. At the root of this prejudice is society's fear of death and it is from this uneasiness and the disinclination for society to confront the subject that instils caution when exercising accreditation of the funeral director. Kearl notes that as this transition occurred in America, funeral directors became stigmatized due to the fact that they were

"...linked to the American death orientation whereby the industry is the cultural scapegoat for failed immortality" (1989: 278).

It is presumably for this reason that the industry in America experienced problems of professionalization around the 1920s when Farrell stated

"...the American public may have been reluctant to bestow the mantle of professionalization on a group of people who worked with the dead" (1980: 155).

Thompson (1991) sees professionalization as one of several techniques for assisting in overcoming stigmatization. As Pine notes, it is a device for the funeral director to "...overcome the stigma of "doing death work"" (1975: 28).

The claim for professional status appear to take two forms. Firstly, the role of the funeral director is re-emphasised as a caregiver to the living and is therefore distanced from the dead. Secondly, the adoption and practice of the craft of embalming is seen a foundation for the claim of professional respectability. Thompson (1991) further argues that role distancing, redefinition of work and cloaking in a "shroud of service" are other methods for achieving this objective. The utilization of both of these former stigma-alleviating devices will be considered below.

b. The economic environment of funerals: profit from loss?

Utilization of the services of a funeral director emphasises the fact that funerals are managed in a commercial environment. In the contractual relationship negotiated between the bereaved and the funeral director a coffin and other goods, services and use of facilities are purchased. In this transaction as in most business activities the price charged covers overheads in addition to earning a margin of profit. It is, however, in the context of funeral directing that the notion arises that profits are gained by the industry from the misfortune of others. In his research among American funeral directors Thompson found the following general opinion prevalent amongst interviewees;

"Many of the funeral directors...believed the major reason for negative public feelings towards their occupation was not only that they handled



dead bodies, but the fact that they made their living off the dead, or at least, off the grief of the living" (1991: 422).

Whilst no critical studies have so far been produced in the UK that compare to those published in the USA (Bowman 1959; Harmer 1963 & Mitford 1963) in respect of profitability and unscrupulous sales tactics, from the perspective of the bereaved it is possible to see how funeral directors can be accused of profiteering from their loss. From one dimension whilst the funeral director is deemed to be indispensable, the fact remains, however, that the vast majority of society are unwilling or unable to undertake comparable duties at a time of bereavement. Resentment stems from the fact that the funeral director levies a charge for providing these goods and services - particularly care for the body - with which in historical terms society has opted not to be involved and, as they believe, have no alternative but to utilize.

In respect of professional status and profits, such a situation raises the issue of manipulation for gain. Johnson (1944) notes that such a consideration occupies second place for true professions. As he states,

"The professional performs his services primarily for the psychic satisfactions and secondarily for the monetary compensations" (Johnson 1944).

One area in which possible manipulation for gain can be detected is in the inequality

that exists in the bargaining process between the bereaved and the funeral director.

The Funeral Charges Report 1977 was first to comment on this aspect when it stated;

"...in the relationship between the funeral director and client, the former has a marked psychological and commercial advantage, so that the balance of bargaining power is titled in his favour" (FC 1997: 37).

Since this date other consumerist publications have made similar reference. For example, Youngson;

"The funeral director is engaged in a business for profit and, like all business men, aims to make as large a profit as possible...the director has a unique psychological advantage over you. Your resistance is low. You may be shocked out of your normal disturbance of judgement so far as matters connected with your loved one are concerned. The experience of the ages has shown that when people have this sort of power over others, there is a strong tendency for it to corrupt. The director is certainly entitled to a fair profit, but he is not entitled to manipulate you ruinously for his advantage" (1989: 120).

The payment to funeral arranging staff of coffin commission can be seen to give rise to this problem. This issue pivots around the issue of vulnerability of the service user. However, Canine (1996: 222) points out that individuals are nevertheless "vulnerable"

in other circumstances and cites that of the physician offering a patient a biopsy to ascertain if a growth is malignant or otherwise.

It must be pointed out that one major problem for the industry concerning funeral charges - which was briefly alluded to in chapter 1 - is of "dramatic realization" (Goffman 1959: 40). Many tasks - particularly physical and especially cadaver-related - are completed "behind the scenes" in non-public areas of the premises. This results in a situation where clients may not be aware of what is actually involved and thus how and where the funeral director's charges are being spent. As Goffman notes:

"...the proprietor of a service establishment may find it difficult to dramatize what is actually being done for clients because the clients cannot actually "see" the overhead costs of the service rendered them" (Goffman 1959: 41).

Despite the use of itemization on pre-funeral estimates and accounts, clients may not appreciate the labour-intensive nature of funerals. Although Hodgson points to the fact that the average funeral takes about 40 man-hours to complete, it is not surprising to find the following journalistic statement:

"...the public's great misconception that making several hundred pounds is not bad for a couple of hours' work" (1992: 97).



At the root of these "misconceptions" may be the fact that the industry is not regarded in any serious manner by the mainstream business/management sector. Although there is evidence of competition between firms, from the perspective of outsiders it would appear that the industry operates in a trading environment whose source is without end. Death will always occur and despite DIY funerals, the funeral director will always be required. Whilst Hodgson (1992) attempts to portray his funeral organization just like any efficient retail or service industry through the employment of business specialists in areas such as marketing, PR and finance, at the end of the day he can still be regarded as simply an entrepreneurial funeral director.

The issue of finance is clearly a problem for funeral firms irrespective of size or operational type. However, it can be argued that the latter is a greater dilemma for the large organization that may have shareholders to satisfy. It would appear that there has been much adverse consumer reaction to the presence of SCI in the UK market. The issue of the retention of trading names, concerns over the "Americanization" of funeral service in addition to the belief that SCI's portentous investment must yield a favourable return appear to give rise to concern over sales tactics and growth policies.

#### Professionalization in practice - the funeral director

The perception of an occupation as a profession is ultimately judged by those coming into contact with it in addition to society at large. As has been indicated in the

previous section, in the same way that a definition of a profession does not exist, neither does the existence of one route to the goal of professionalization. As the objective of this chapter is not to arbitrate as to whether the occupation is or is not a profession, the following section considers ways in which the occupation has attempted to acquire professional status. Whilst this approach identifies characteristics it does not achieve any contrast to those possessed by traditional professions such as medicine and law as has previously been the technique of evaluation.

As the previous section outlined, image and stigmatization are key areas in which the occupation has sought to address. Consequently, many of the methods used are concerned with these issues.

#### (i) The formation of occupational associations

Caplow (1954: 139-40) suggests that the formation of a professional association contributes in a major way to the process of professionalization. Carr-Saunders (1928) notes that they have a long history. In more contemporary times they have been instrumental in establishing professional recognition, such as accountancy (Reader 1966: 191).

Following its establishment, the association then pursues a change of name or occupational description, the construction of a code of ethics and political agitation for

legal constraints on who may or may not perform a service. Regulation of operatives then becomes a task assigned to the occupational association. It is also important to note that Chapman (1952) believes that education is the most important function of an occupational association. Whilst associations involve professionals, their work does not involve individual members of the occupation. Salamon provides the differentiation;

"It is important to distinguish employers' associations from purely trade associations which exclude labour affairs and confine themselves to trade matters such as marketing, pricing, technology etc" (1987: 207).  
(emphasis added)

Occupational associations have been a feature of the funeral industry since the end of the last century; the role of four are evaluated here; The National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD); the British Institute of Funeral Directors (BIFD); the Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors (SAIF); the British Institute of Embalmers (BIE).

The British Undertakers' Association (BUA) was founded in 1904; changing its name to the National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD) in 1935. It can perhaps be considered as the primary occupational association. The BUA/NAFD sets as its principal objective to,



"...organize, watch over, maintain, promote, project and assist the rights and interests of members of the Association, and to give such members the means and advantages of association and united actions" (NAFD 1963: 12).

The BUA's formation essentially resulted from the need for protection. As chapter 4 identified in the early part of this century it was for the undertaker against the carriage master. With the increase in journey time to the newly created out-of-town cemeteries, undertakers with insufficient demand on their service to possess animate power - a hearse and carriages - would be required to utilise the services of a carriage master. Howarth (1992) identifies the monopolistic situation that arose from undertakers relying on carriage masters and the resultant excessive hiring charges.

Membership of the NAFD is entirely corporate and represents the owners of funeral directing organizations rather than individual funeral directors. Membership of the BUA/NAFD has always been and is still voluntary and the NAFD can discipline members including expulsion. However, this does not prevent them from operating as funeral directors.

The NAFD seeks to improve the image of member funeral directors through its public relations function. It issues press releases, comments on incidents and investigates complaints against members. In recent years it appears to have spent considerable energy on defending the role of the funeral director especially since SCI appeared on

the scene.

As is usual with occupational associations, the NAFD publishes a monthly magazine entitled "Funeral Director", arranges an annual conference and operates a code of practice. At local level and only now in a few geographic areas it is also involved in collective bargaining. The NAFD also examines individuals for its Diploma in Funeral Directing. Registration of funeral directors is also a stated objective of the NAFD and although various attempts have been made to register individuals it has been without success (Wilson and Levy (1938: 169), NAFD (1963: 14) & Buckland (1969)). At the time of writing (October 1996) a recent attempt to create an internally managed register has been rejected.

Individual funeral directors - in contrast to corporate organizations - may join the British Institute of Funeral Directors (BIFD). Essentially it is an educational and qualifying association (Millerson 1964a: 37) and like the NAFD has not been successful with registration. It holds business meetings, publishes a journal and awards membership certificates. It is a multi-grade qualifying association (Millerson 1964: 38) and offers designatory letters, MBIFD, FBIFD and hon MBIFD (there being no student category). Prospective full members must possess the NAFD Diploma in Funeral Directing, although recent changes (1994) have permitted other qualifications to be recognised, such as NVQ, BTEC and overseas credentials. It exercises a certain degree of control as the BIFD accredits tutors who only then may prepare students for the Diploma in Funeral Directing examination. Reflecting its individual rather than

corporate membership, the BIFD possesses a Code of Ethics to which all members are obliged to adhere. Its clauses include personal integrity and care for the dead.

The Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors (SAIF) parallels with the NAFD but as its name suggests represents only the interests of funeral directing firms not owned by the larger organizations, such as the Co-op or SCI. Its date of establishment is significant - the late 1980s. SAIF operates in exactly the same manner as the NAFD. It maintains a code of practice similar in construction to the NAFD's code; membership is entirely voluntary and it is only for corporate members. At the time of writing it has just commenced an educational programme.

The British Institute of Embalmers (BIE) was formed in 1927 after the first occupational association - the British Embalmers Society (BES) which was part of the BUA - was absorbed into a trade association and then become a trade union.

The BIE is an examining body, but it is also a qualifying association. Thus it combines the equivalent functions of the NAFD and BIFD in providing a qualification as well as individual membership status for candidates who have been successful in the Institute's theoretical and practical examinations. It has grades of membership for students, honorary members, full members and fellows. The latter are permitted to use the designatory letters MBIE and FBIE. Like the BIFD, the BIE has a Code of Ethics which comprises five clauses, such as a belief in the objective of embalming, confidentiality, respect of the dead. etc. It is interesting to note that at the presentation of certificates



to newly qualified embalmers the Code of Ethics is repeated by all present at the ceremony, thus reaffirming individual members allegiance to "professional" standards.

The above four funeral directing/embalming occupational organizations each represent a different sector within the industry. Each provides for specific needs and inevitably in such a small sphere there is a degree of overlap. For example, many firms are members of the NAFD and SAIF whilst a number of individuals are members of both BIE and BIFD. Although all organizations have the power to discipline or suspend from membership, the fact remains that membership to any of the above four groups is voluntary. Individuals may practice as funeral directors and/or embalmers without any experience or qualification and also continue to operate after expulsion. Thus there is little control over operatives in the industry. Nevertheless each occupational organization strives to proclaim its presence by encouraging firms or individuals to embrace membership and through the means of distinguishing between members and non-members, for example by the display of logos, letters of affiliations and the code of practice. To the public these act as proof of the individual firm's commitment to a professional ideal and the desire for its occupational profile to be reassessed.

In addition to these four occupational associations, in April 1994 the Funeral Ombudsman Scheme (FOS) was launched. It is not an association, but individual firms are members including a substantial proportion of the Co-operative funeral service. Its purpose is to investigate complaints against its members and where necessary award damages to aggrieved clients. As a complaints bureau it service mirrors that of SAIF

and NAFD. However, in contrast to these it is independent from the industry not in financial terms but through its staff who are drawn from academia, the law and consumer groups.

Display of membership of the scheme gives funeral directors the ability to advertise their willingness for complaints to be scrutinized externally.

## (ii) Education

Whilst the occupational associations contribute towards image improvement through education of the public as to the actual function the funeral director performs, the general education and qualification of funeral director have been a concern of the industry throughout this century. Whilst what exists does not compare with the state licensing system in America, evidence indicates funeral directors regarding education as a vital technique for occupational furtherance. Prior notes the keenness of funeral directors to "...be perceived as professionals..." and in doing so they,

"...often pin certificates of competence and qualification on the walls of their offices, much as an optician, a dental surgeon or a pharmacist might do" (1989: 159-160).

Diploma certificates awarded by the NAFD, BIE and BIFD, as well those for

attending/achieving management training and bereavement counselling courses can frequently be seen for public gaze in conspicuous locations on the walls of funeral director's funeral arranging offices. Similarly, qualified funeral directors and embalmers frequently draw from the available inventory of decorative letters to announce their competence on business cards, letter headings, trade journals, etc. However, it should be noted that in contrast to the above, pharmacists display their qualification certificate to meet a legal requirement rather than merely acting as proof of proficiency.

The principle qualification for funeral directors is the Diploma in Funeral Directing (Dip FD). It was initiated in 1959 and is taught by tutors qualified by the BIFD. However, it is examined and awarded by the NAFD. The Diploma syllabus reflects the work of the funeral director in administrative terms; emphasis is placed on knowledge of documents and procurement procedures, such as burial, cremation, registration, exhumation, etc. In addition, a modicum of practical work with optional body-related tasks is included.

Smale makes the following rather antagonistic comment regarding the Diploma;

"No matter how prestigious their Diploma appears to be to the uninitiated, it is in fact lacking any high degree of technical, theoretical or specialized contents" (1985: 189).

More recently NVQ and BTEC examinations have been implemented, although these



are largely practically-orientated. Qualifications also exist for embalming. Prior to the Dip FD, both the BES and the BIE issued diplomas. By examining sanitary rather than funeral directing/administration skills it can be argued that at an early stage the occupation realized the value of embalming as a specialist craft and a route to professional recognition - an argument developed in (vi) below.

All funeral service education is voluntary; what exists is also not part of any on-going educational programme. It is also interesting to note that the Dip FD is presented only after two-years' experience of the work environment has been gained by the candidate - that is post-practice qualification.

In the last decade there is evidence to indicate attempts by funeral firms to emphasis the overall quality of their service. Although individual qualifications contribute to this development, a number of firms have been awarded a BSI number in recognition of their standard of service to the public.<sup>1</sup> The latter demonstrates a keenness to be perceived alongside other organizations with this accreditation in addition to utilization of a mainstream business device that is gaining in recognition.

(iii) A Code of practice/ethics (see figures i & ii)

Each of the four occupational associations mentioned in (a) above operates a code of

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<sup>1</sup> See Funeral Service Journal Vol110 No2 February 1995 pp54-61

practice/ethics according to corporate or individual membership respectively. Member firms/individuals of the association are obliged to adhere to the provisions.

It is interesting to note that until the current NAFD Code of Practice was circulated in 1979 a Code of Ethics did exist for firms which, unlike the present Code, was explicit on individual behaviour. The change can be seen to represent a shift from a need to control personal to consumer influenced behaviour.

Both the NAFD and SAIF Codes can be seen to assist in overcoming problems attached to the economic environment of funerals. Both require the issue of an estimate before the funeral and post-funeral clear itemization in the final account, thus indicating cost apportionment. In addition, they provide guidelines on advertising and the solicitation - financial or otherwise - of funeral orders. A complaints procedure is also part of the Code; in its advanced stages external organizations are involved.

In conjunction with advertising, it is interesting to note that as with many occupations and established professions, such as solicitors, funeral directors' advertisements increasingly state funeral prices.

The BIFD and BIE provide a Code of Ethics for individual members which focuses upon personal qualities and characteristics, such as respect for the dead and care for the bereaved.

# CODE OF ETHICS

APPROVED BY THE

**British Undertakers' Association and the British Embalmers' Society**

(INCORPORATED)

1. As an undertaker on entering the business becomes thereby entitled to all its privileges, he incurs an obligation to exert his best abilities to maintain its honour and dignity, to extend its usefulness, and to exalt its standing.
2. Secrecy and delicacy, when required by peculiar circumstances, should be strictly observed. The obligation of secrecy extends beyond the period of our professional services.
3. None of the privacies of personal and domestic life should ever be divulged.
4. An undertaker should rely chiefly on his professional abilities and acquirements for the development of his business, and should discourage advertisements that tend to loudness and competition, looking forward to the time when such advertisements will be considered unprofessional.
5. When two undertakers are called at the same time to attend the same case, both should show a willingness to withdraw, leaving the choice with the family.
6. An undertaker should not shrink from the faithful discharge of his duties in case of epidemic and contagious diseases.
7. When an undertaker is called in case of sudden death or accident, because the family undertaker be not at hand, he should offer, if the family so desire, to resign the case to the latter, who should remunerate him for services rendered.
8. When an undertaker accompanies the remains and funeral party to a distant place, and if the remains are placed in care of another undertaker, anything he may do after that should be as a friend of the family, and as assisting the undertaker in charge of final arrangements.
9. When an undertaker orders from a distant place a corpse to be prepared and shipped to his care, all proper expenses should be charged to the undertaker giving the order, and it should be considered a professional obligation, and payment made at once.
10. Touting and soliciting for funeral orders is derogatory to the profession and should be rigorously discouraged.

Fig 1. Code of Ethics Approved by the British Undertakers' Association and the British Embalmers Society



## NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FUNERAL DIRECTORS

### CODE OF PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

As a condition of membership, Members of the National Association of Funeral Directors agree to comply with the principles and the details of this Code of Practice:

#### CODE OF PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

1. To observe strictly the confidence of every client at all times.
2. To observe at all times the basic rights of clients as consumers.
3. To render good service at all times and make fair charges in respect of services rendered and for merchandise supplied.
4. To ensure that advertising is always in good taste. No sensational, offensive or misleading advertising is permitted.
5. To provide clients with full and fair information about services. To have readily-available price lists covering the BASIC FUNERAL and all other types of coffins, caskets and services provided.
6. To display in the public area of premises, price lists which will show both the total price for the funeral service and the cost of the principal constituent items.
7. To give a written estimate of all funeral charges and disbursements to be made on a client's behalf together with written confirmation of the funeral arrangements in each and every case as soon as is practicable before the day of the funeral. No contractual agreement will have been entered into until this has been accepted by the client.
8. To provide all clients with an itemised account in a form readily comparable with the estimate.
9. To refrain from soliciting funeral orders or offering or giving any reward for recommendation to persons or organisations such as health service establishments, nursing homes or coroners' offices, etc.
10. To display to the general public the Association's logo to demonstrate observance of this Code of Practice.
11. To co-operate at all times with Trading Standards Officers, Citizen Advice Bureaux, consumer support groups and any other body or organisation representing clients in the resolution of complaints or disputes.
12. To partake in, and abide by, the Conciliation, Arbitration and Disciplinary Procedures of the Association in the resolution of any complaints or disputes between a client and Funeral Director(s).
13. To abide by the decisions of the Disciplinary Committee of the Association in the resolution of any complaints arising from any disputes between a client and Funeral Director(s).

This Code and adherence hereto is monitored by the National Association of Funeral Directors. Correspondence should be addressed to:-

National Association of Funeral Directors  
618 Warwick Road, Solihull,  
West Midlands, B91 1AA

Fig 2 National Association of Funeral Directors - Code of Practice Principles

(iv) Presentational changes: language, dress and premises

The importance of correct and appropriate language necessary to create the "...competence of actions and believability in performance..." for the aspiring professional is identified by Unruh (1979: 251). In respect of funeral directing, Thompson notes:

"A rose by any other name may smell as sweet, but death work by almost any other name does not sound quite as harsh" (1991: 412).

Terms that primarily contain body-related words are dealt with through symbolically negating (Thompson 1991: 412) the language.

It is in the office environment that noticeable adjustments to terminology can be detected. Although specifically referring to the American industry, Habenstein notes language changes such as "Undertaker's parlour" to "funeral home" and "embalming" becoming "preparation" (Habenstein 1962: 234). Such examples can be cited as having been adopted and utilized by funeral organizations and personnel in this country, although the excesses of the American industry as listed by Bailey (1989: 274) such as "Vital statistics form" in place of death certificate have so far escaped the vocabulary of British funeral directors. Much of this new vocabulary which avoids any mention of death-related phrases or words reflects the denial of death (Thompson 1991: 412).

Howarth detects that the language funeral directors speak,

"...is the language of altruism which constantly refers to public protection; willingness to serve; and the need for consumer trust" (1992: 236).

Certainly the objectives advanced for the application of embalming - presentation, preservation and sanitation - confirm the use of protectional terminology that emphasises benefits for the client. The Manual of Funeral Directing (1988) is a rich resource for English funeral directing terminology.

Huntington & Metcalf quote Kaut's findings of the use of death-related euphemisms when they state,

"...these...may have less to do with the insecurities of the public over mortality than with the insecurities of the specialists over their professional status. These titles represent a desire to shake off their pallid public image and acquire more of the *éclat* of the medical profession" (1979: 195).

Of an allied nature to the above in terms of presentation is the dress and appearance of the funeral director. The increasing disinclination by society to wear black to funerals has been noted by Taylor (1983) and correspondingly this has been reflected in the



apparel of funeral personnel. Habenstein again recognizes the importance of image as created by clothing when he states,

"A "professional" funeral director simply should not, in common sense terms, look like the stereotypical truck driver, lawyer, or graduate student" (1962: 234).

Although somewhat dated, the Manual of Funeral Directing encourages funeral directors to discard black as it represents, "...the intrusion of death into a household", and to adopt,

"...A plain dark suit, clean and well pressed, such as many doctors and solicitors choose..." (MFD 1988: Ch1.1).

The latter indicates the industry's anxiety to be paralleled with solicitors. In confirmation of such change, all chauffeur bearers employed in Howard Hodgson's organization PHKI were supplied with light grey suits and silver and blue striped ties.

Further attempts at addressing the presentational image can be seen to have been made through the reordering of funeral premises to create a comfortable, non-clinical and neutral atmosphere away from the perceived gloomy ambience of the 19th century undertaking establishment. Although many independent firms have been refurbished, the policies of acquisition and subsequent rationalization by the large organizations

have contributed to this process. Many old premises have been significantly scaled-down in capacity and modernized in the process. The newly created branches have office and reception accommodation decorated in soft colour schemes - often pastel shades with floral motifs. The formal office composition comprising the desk separating the funeral director from the clients is being increasingly replaced by a the board room table "conference" approach or a couch and easy chairs. The term office is often replaced with funeral home, thus recalling the involvement of the family in a bereavement and diminishing the clinical nature of the traditional office environment. Worthy of note is the absence of religious symbols in the public reception and window display areas thus creating a neutral atmosphere in denominational terms. This stresses that funeral directors are anxious to serve with equal professionalism all section of the community irrespective of religious persuasion.

#### (v) Change in occupational title and role redefinition

In terms of image one of the most noticeable areas of change must be in the occupational description from "undertaker" to "funeral director" and it is the industry that can be seen as the instigator of such a development.<sup>2</sup>

In 1935 the British Undertakers' Association took the deliberate step of changing its

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis the term undertaker is used when discussing the functionary operating before the mid 1930s and funeral director from that date onwards.

name to the National Association of Funeral Directors (similarly its periodical changed from the BUA Monthly to The National Funeral Director - now simply Funeral Director).

Turner and Edgley view this change in occupational title as,

"...perhaps the largest single clue to the dramaturgical functions the industry now sees itself as performing" (1976: 384).

Whilst the use of the new description can be seen to have come from the USA, primarily its adoption was designed to reflect changes occurring in the role the functionary actually undertook. Directing implies overseeing an operation in which others participate in contrast to undertaking which represents actually performing. Thus the change of description is significant in terms of date for two reasons.

Firstly, the 1930s started to witness increasing centralization of funerals by the large organizations and a restricting of roles and secondly, the same period witnessed the acquisition of responsibility in terms of caring for the body.

As the previous chapter indicated, the large bureaucratically orientated organizations utilize task fragmentation where staff operate in predetermined spheres of competence. Funeral directors in centralized organizations literally represent what the new title implies - directing or overseeing the operation in contrast to performing or physically



"undertaking" individual tasks. Funeral directors (and receptionists - their female counterparts in a solely administrative capacity) interact with the public through arranging and conducting funerals. The task of routine bodyhandling falls within the job description of the chauffeur bearer/coffin fitter whilst preservation and presentation has been relegated to the embalmer. Thus in pragmatic terms the funeral director has become distanced from the dead body - the source of stigmatization.

Goffman (1959: 53) notes that most professions have a clean and dirty side. The adoption of a new title has given the funeral director the opportunity to be physically separated from the dead body. More importantly, however, it has given the opportunity to emphasise the new role in a service capacity as carer for the bereaved. In respect of the funeral directors that Prior located in Belfast he states:

"Some undertakers go so far as to reinterpret their role so as to play down their involvement with corpses and emphasise their role as ministers to the bereaved (1989: 160).

It is perhaps significant to note that funeral directors who regularly arrange funerals are increasingly the recipient of bereavement training by organizations such as CRUSE, in addition to the subject being included in the Dip FD syllabus. Porter (1968: 43) detects a similar situation in respect of funeral directors in American firms. Additionally, some American publications refer to the role of the funeral director as a counsellor (Raether and Slater 1975) or grief facilitator (Rando 1989). (See also Worden 1991 & Canine

1996).

Whilst the change of name reflects developments in the tasks undertaken it also focuses on the new image as a service provider. As chapter 1 pointed out, the occupation can be classified as a service industry and employees speak of being employed "in funeral service". This new avenue of emphasis highlights the increased responsibility the funeral director has acquired. The role was changed from merely selling goods to providing a service. Funeral organizations are keen to advertise this fact of service to the community - essentially the bereaved in their time of need. Advertisements frequently state the number of years or generations that the organization has served the locality and an important part of this service ideal is through the commitment to provide a 24 hour service. This ideal of caring for the bereaved has given occupational associations the opportunity to portray funeral service as a vocation. Funeral directors are said to answer a sacred calling; personal sacrifices are made of time and energy. Thus it can be seen that the occupation views this device as a means of paralleling funeral directing with allied occupations and professions, such as the Church.

Further integration with the community to enable the occupation to be more clearly understood can be seen to occur through funeral directors becoming members of "worthy" associations, such as Rotary, Round Table or the chamber of commerce. In addition, membership of organizations, such as churches and freemasonry is also held.

## Professionalization: funeral directing and embalming

Howarth (1992, 1993a&b) suggests that funeral directors base their claim for professional status on the practice of embalming;

"It is the pseudo-scientific nature of the work such as embalming that forms the basis for the industry's claim to professional respectability..." (1993b: 234).

A similar argument is advanced by Bowman (1959) and Thompson (1991) in respect of American funeral directors. Whilst the value to the bereaved in terms of presentation and preservation is immense, from the perspective of professionalization of the funeral director embalming is important for two reasons. Whilst it is likely that in the first three decades of this century more column inches appeared in the British trade publication on the subject than embalmments actually carried out, the ensuing years have seen a dramatic increase in practice as chapter 3 indicated.<sup>3</sup>

Firstly, in purely physical terms, embalming transfers the source of stigmatization - the body - away from the ambit of the function of the funeral director. Thus stigmatization has been managed by "passing" (Goffman 1963) it, in this case, to low grade workers for

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<sup>3</sup> The publication of American articles such as "The Accomplished Funeral Director" (Elliott 1925: 8) in the British trade press was a frequent event during this period. Whenever the word embalming occurred in these articles references to professional status or professionalization could almost certainly be found.



routine handling and to the embalmer for preservation.

Without the taint of bodyhandling funeral directors can place increased emphasis on their role as a caregiver to the living in contrast to that of a custodian of the dead. This confirms the earlier statement made in respect of change in the occupational title to funeral director. Further evidence of distancing from the dead is provided by the main occupational association the NAFD disbanding its embalmers' section (the BES) in the 1950s. Furthermore, in the Diploma in Funeral Directing syllabus knowledge of body-related tasks are confined to a theoretical level and form only a relatively minor part of the course.

The increased degree of separation from the dead is particularly clear in large organizations where contact is usually minimal - often confined to escorting clients into the chapel - or in some case eliminated altogether. This emphasises the fragmentation of funeral directing as employees work in specific spheres and thus can be seen as specialists. In contrast, in smaller organizations where a few staff perform all tasks - which may include embalming - they have knowledge and experience of all functions comprising the overall scope of funeral service.

Secondly, responsibility for preservation of the dead to this specialist functionary gives the embalmer scope for professionalizing. Embalming is seen not in parallel to routine bodyhandling but as a craft in which an object of contamination is humanized (Howarth 1992) through arresting the natural process of decomposition and by

beautification to create a "sleeping-death" appearance.<sup>4</sup>

Although embalming is a relatively simple craft to be acquired (Thompson 1991: 419) and in this country formal training is optional, it has a foundation in anatomical theory and chemistry. Through the BIE, embalmers are keen to point to the technical nature of their task and most importantly to the sanitary effect of embalming. Preservation, presentation, sanitization and physical and psychological protection are readily used where references to the objectives and benefits of embalming are discussed. In addition, qualification brings with it a degree of recognition by others in funeral-related occupations.

## Conclusion

The motivation for the occupation of funeral directing to professionalize can largely be attributed to the aspiration to elevate its position in the eyes of the public. In addition to a desire to depart from the legacy of corruption arising from the occupation operating in the previous century, the increasing complexity of the disposal environment together with additional occupational responsibilities have provided the catalyst to project a professional image. However, it is argued here that stigmatization from body handling and the issue of mixing finance with the inevitability of death are areas which hinder professionalization of funeral directing.

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<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Phil Gore for this phrase.

Despite this the occupation has pursued a number of devices and developments in an attempt to achieve this quest: change of the occupational description, thus reflecting growing complexity of the function; the emphasis on quality and commitment of service to the bereaved; the use of sensitive and at times evasive terminology particularly concerning the body; occupational grouping; a Code of Practice and qualifications have all contributed to the overall quest.

Organizational change has also contributed to the process as through work fragmentation employees in large organizations are distanced from the dead. However, it is argued here that this lead to a paradox as employees in large firms could be regarded as specialists in an information handling or administrative capacity in contrast to the small funeral organizations where staff have experience and practical knowledge of all aspects of funeral direction.

Ultimately professionalization of funeral directing can be seen as a pre-occupation of the industry.



## Chapter 7 - Conclusions

### Introduction

The intention of this thesis has been to identify and explain the shift in the organizational structure of the funeral industry that has occurred during the 20th century. Commencing with an historical overview of the disposal of the dead and followed by an examination of the factors that have influenced change in the work of the funeral director, the research then considers organizational and operational change in the industry itself. The fieldwork contained in the ensuing chapter appraises the operational design of the large organization in contrast to a newly established small independent firm. Lastly, the issue of professionalization has been critically examined identifying why and how the funeral director has sought to elevate both image and position.

Around 1900 the family and community was involved in funeral performance in a strategic capacity, not only in terms of the prevailing type of organizational structure of the undertaking firm, but also through the provision of a female who attended to laying out. However, as chapter 3 outlined, through the transition of death from the home to the institutionalized environment, which has been stimulated by attitudinal and spatial changes occurring from around the 1920s, the undertaker's work has been realigned to meet these developments. With increased responsibility towards the dead body, the undertaker provided the chapel of rest as the new place of repose for the dead. To achieve preservation and presentation of the dead, embalming was later adopted.

Today its application is widespread particularly in the urban setting and among the large firms. Embalming not only gave the industry an effective and relatively inexpensive technique for treating the dead, but also presented individual funeral directors with a quasi-scientific skill. It is argued that having gained virtually complete possession of the body has considerably enhanced the funeral director's power and control over the funeral process.

As other aspects of funerary responsibility gradually became the prerogative of the funeral director a further shift can be detected in the occupational description from undertaker to funeral director, thus reflecting the increase in internal supervisory and directional tasks being encountered. From an external perspective, further changes in funeral performance were also experienced at this time through the increase in the preference for cremation. This rational method of disposal coincided with the shift from animate to vehicular power experienced by the industry, thus permitting increased cost-efficient use of the funeral director's main capital assets. Thus it is possible to identify a relationship between the spatial changes in the place of dying and of disposal, reflecting society divesting its responsibility and an increase in the responsibility of the funeral director both for the dead and bereaved by being the provider of an expert, specialist service.

It is advanced in this thesis that the combined effect of these changes in the segregation of the dead together with urbanization and the increase in cremation, have presented funeral directors with the opportunity to apply a centralized operational system of funeral management. By pooling all resources and facilities in one location a

number of branch offices can be supplied according to need. The rationale underlying such a strategy is to achieve maximum economic control of capital-intensive assets, whilst also gleaning benefits attributable to large scale operations - such as bulk coffin purchase - that attract economies of scale and also prudent funeral vehicle management. As firms - particularly in the urban areas - expanded by establishing new branch offices, for example in south London in the 1930s and 1940s, it became clear that this centralized technique was an effective and therefore successful approach to the management of funerals.

From the 1960s the problems of succession together with costs of operation have increased for independent funeral firms. Through the goodwill generated by the trading identity such firms have been viewed as viable propositions for the purpose of acquisition. Integration into an already established centralized operational unit then follows. During the 1980s this shift in ownership was effected in an aggressive manner chiefly by large specialist funeral directing organizations, such as Hodgson, Great Southern and Kenyon, the latter three raising capital for their acquisitional programme through being listed as Public Limited Companies. Although in comparative terms the acquisition of independent firms declined in the late 1980s and early 1990s, concentration of the dominating organizations occurred when a major American corporation with an international portfolio of funeral holdings made two strategic purchases in 1994.

The findings show that these developments have radically changed the structure of the funeral industry in Britain. However, although the large organization accounts for a



significant market share of funerals arranged, it is held that the independent family-owned firm sector continues to manage over half the total number of funerals taking place in this country. It is the operational design and structure of the large organization that essentially forms the major area for investigation in this thesis.

In chapter 4 it is argued that the presence of large organizations in the management of funerals has given rise to a number of factors that have had a direct effect on funeral performance. As a consequence of its scale of operation, it is advanced that a Fordist-style approach towards the management of funerals has been adopted in the internal centralized operational unit. Through the adoption of such an approach it is further argued that the large organization relies on the predictability and calculability of funeral performance and in doing aims to manage its resources according to historical data, such as client demands and the average time taken to complete a funeral. Ritzer (1993) acknowledges these rational working methods as characteristics of McDonaldization. This approach towards funeral management by the large organization can be seen to generate a number of important operational issues.

Firstly, from an organizational perspective the large organization is managed as a bureaucracy. The evidence illustrates that such organizations possess characteristics, as identified by Weber. For example, chapter 5 confirms the aspects discussed in the previous chapter in respect of task specialization, standardization and formalization in the large organizations. From this it can be detected that the underlying philosophy towards funeral management is mechanistic (Burns and Stalker 1966). It relies on predictability, efficiency, quantification and control. However, a negative consequence

of bureaucracy is depersonalization. For example, as chapter 4 discusses and chapter 5 illustrates in respect of LFO, the lack of continuity between funeral arranger and conductor can be ascribed to task specialization. Whilst this leads to an optimum use of human resources, it is nevertheless responsible for generating a degree of depersonalization. On balance, however, it must be appreciated that clients may well be challenged to differentiate between levels of personal service provided by individual organizations due to the infrequency of contact with funeral directors and therefore the inability to contrast the service given. It could further be argued that personal service may represent the degree of efficiency with which the funeral arrangements are handled as a whole rather than the level of personal continuity.

Secondly, there is evidence to suggest that whilst the large organization achieves economies of scale from bulk coffin purchasing and of general centralization of resources, it is apparent that dis-economies of scale also emerge. Several areas were noticeable from the empirical research. The first problem arises from the flow of information between all involved in managing the funeral performance. In the study of the large funeral organization - LFO - one administration office co-ordinates the manpower and resources for sixteen branch offices. A highly formal and standardized system of documentation and channels of communication exists to process the information. However, it was clearly evident that frequent distortions occurred in the system, for example, through the inability to cope with last-minute client generated changes to instructions. This problem was largely a result of the disproportionate workload in the administration office in comparison with the branch offices, a lack of mutual appreciation of difficulties in addition to the issue of communication. A not

infrequent consequence was spoilt funeral performance.

A second area concerns the reliance by the large organization on the calculability of funeral performance that further emphasises the mechanistic approach towards funerals. As mentioned above, as a result of the increase in cremation and the attendant time parameters in operation at crematoria, funerals are determined in a rationalist framework as predictable. For the large organization this enables the most capital intensive assets - staff and vehicles - to be used to their optimum level. Funerals are booked so that they "work-over" - to use the industry parlance - from one funeral to another. However, with so many variables comprising the booking equation, such as client demands and/or church, cemetery or crematorium commitments, it was found that the result was often "tight work-overs" between funerals, a factor compounded by the distance and traffic concentration when journeying between branches. As a result of such a system the chances of spoilt performance are again increased.

A final example of dis-economies of scale appears to be of a long-term nature. From observation at LFO, management time was largely spent on solving ad hoc operational problems, thereby curtailing the time available to focus upon strategic developments and the overall growth of the organization.

Thirdly, it is argued that large organizations give rise to conflicts resulting from the pursuit of alternative objectives. From a financial perspective, evidence suggests that conflicts exist which lead to the fulfilment of what are advanced as short-term objectives with long-term consequences. For their ultimate survival funeral firms not



only rely upon the occurrence of death in a locality but also on consumer preference. However, if the organization is in a position where competition in the trading areas has increased and a reduction in the number of available funerals has also declined, a decrease in turnover will be experienced. Although efforts at containing expenditure may be exercised, for example through staff reduction, if insufficient attention is assigned to the promotion of the organization and maintenance of standards, a decline in revenue may result in the long-term. This may be particularly apparent if a local competitor reinforces price and promotion as key survival tools. Although such a situation may lead to the organization managing to forego growth and consequently shareholder satisfaction in the short-term, it is argued that long-term growth may be affected. It is also advanced that the payment to funeral arranging staff of graduated coffin commission gives rise to the possibility that exploitative tactics may be utilized to secure the sale of an expensive coffin or casket. Whilst such a scheme may increase the remuneration of the employee, it can have an adverse effect upon the firm's reputation as clients may later regret the high level of expenditure at such an emotional time.

Whilst large organizations are keen to proclaim to shareholders their cost-effective operations attributable to the centralized management, no evidence exists of these benefits being passed to the consumer. It is therefore surmised that such savings are retained by the organization for shareholder distribution or absorbed by dis-economies of scale.

Lastly, the issue of the large organization retaining a trading name following acquisition

is examined. It is argued that as in such a situation the public are unaware of the true identity of ownership of the firm, this is a form of depersonalization. Although this strategy is intended to maintain consumer loyalty where an oligopoly or monopoly situation exists, clients may not wish to deal with a large organization. In such a circumstance it may be argued that a degree of deception exists. The latter is a major issue which has been considered by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC 1987 & 1995).

The final areas examined in this thesis is that of the professionalization of the funeral director. Evidence exists to indicate that the industry is desirous of elevating its status in the eyes of the public and four reasons are cited as to why it has embarked upon the process; all essentially relate to the image issue. Stigmatization through bodyhandling and the belief that the funeral director profits from bereavement are discussed from the perspective of their hindrance to professional status.

In addition to the more traditional characteristics associated with professionalization, such as occupational formation, code of ethics and education, presentational aspects are identified together with the importance of role redefinition. In terms of change in the occupational description as well as the actual tasks undertaken, the development of embalming is seen as a mechanism to enable funeral directors to distance themselves from the body. As a result, funeral directors emphasise their role as caregivers to the living. However, with embalming fulfilling a sanitary objective and having a foundation in anatomy and chemistry, it is argued that the embalmer is similarly provided with the opportunity to professionalize.

## The Future - An outline of areas indicative of change

Areas of change that are likely to be encountered in the future can be identified as follows: (i) developments the industry will experience and (ii) consumer-driven changes upon funerals and the work of the funeral director.

### (i) The funeral industry

In terms of the change in the future, two areas can be identified; the pre-paid funeral market and structural changes.

#### The pre-paid funeral market

Although pre-paid funeral plans have existed in the British market for a number of years the extent of their sale was limited, possibly due to inappropriate and therefore ineffective marketing. However, with an increasingly ageing population and stimulated by consumer awareness and competition, pre-paid funeral plans are likely to play an important role in the future especially for the large organizations. From the perspective of the funeral director pre-paid plans are seen as a useful means of securing a future market share (Meek 1995: 63 & Canine 1996: 224).

Whilst for the small independent organization the plans fulfil this role on a local level,



their use is hindered by the problem of the plan holder moving away from the area. To acknowledge sale of the plan - but not necessarily the fact that the firm will undertake the funeral - the vendor receives commission. The plan is then held centrally. When death occurs a funeral director is appointed who may or may not be the one who sold the plan. The funeral director then claims from the central fund. With organizations such as the Co-op and SCI - the latter experiencing tremendous sales growth in America - their usefulness as a mechanism for securing future business is clearly powerful. Irrespective of the geographic relocation of the person who purchased the plan, with a nationwide network of branch offices it is likely that an office will not be too far from the client when the time comes to arrange the funeral. In the meantime the organization already benefits from investing the capital. The latter organization is also in a better position to monitor internal costs and reflect these in the price of their pre-paid plans. For the independent firms, however, with a central external organization determining the remuneration to funeral directors, redemption payments may not reflect regional costs.

Whilst the plans seek to secure future revenue for the funeral director, it is likely that the costing of plans will become increasingly difficult as the disbursements such as burial and cremation fees, escalate.

It would also appear that despite the recommendations of the OFT (1995) report and support from SCI, statutory regulation of the plans will not be forthcoming. Voluntary Codes of Practice devised by both the National Association of Pre-Paid Funeral Plans (NAPFP) and the Funeral Planning Council (FPC) will continue to be the only means

of supervision.

Structural changes – is small beautiful?

In respect of further concentration of the industry, it is likely that SCI and other organizations with a strong capital base, such as some Co-ops, will continue to seek funeral businesses for acquisition and integration into centralized workings. Certainly, with economies of scale generated by rationalization following the merging of Great Southern and Plantsbrook's assets coupled with an international portfolio of similar organization, SCI will possess revenue with which to acquire funeral businesses. However, large organizations purchasing independent firms face two problems.

Firstly, it is clear that with so many small businesses being acquired in the 1980s little chance exists of a similar number being available in the future. Nevertheless both small and medium sized funeral firms remain in the market and due to the size and viability of particularly the latter type of organization, it is probable that only firms with sufficient financial resources, such as SCI or the Co-ops, will be able to execute such purchases. However, further acquisitions are likely to create monopoly trading situations. With competition in some areas already considerably reduced following the integration of Great Southern with Plantsbrook and coupled with a decline in the number of available funerals as experienced particularly in the inner London area, the result is a case of the survival of the fittest. Such circumstances may prompt further investigation by the MMC. The consequences of elimination or reduction of competition is a prominent if not the fundamental concern of the MMC. In its last

report (MMC 1995) the position was made quite clear, especially following the recommendation of the Director General of the Office of Fair Trading (OFT 1995: 4-5), that in future SCI must seek approval before proposed acquisitions in certain areas are effected. Secondly, it would appear that independent status is a marketable characteristic and that integration of a small business into a centralized operational unit effectively reduces the number of funerals handled.

Evidence from our fieldstudy suggests that the personally vested interest of independent ownership is likely to generate more individual commitment as survival is dependent upon a combination of recommendation, reputation, price, promotion and standard of service. Thus the owner of an independent business is likely to possess a high level of motivation to promote his/her organization through personal visits, thus maintaining greater contact with those who are in a position to make recommendations, etc., than those who are merely employed in large organizations. It is certainly significant that Colin Field - a former director of the Great Southern Group - commented:

"...arguably the quality of service is reduced when a paid member of staff replaces the owner whose income is directly related to the success of the business, for he always gives that little bit more and, indeed, this will always be the case and, therefore, one will never see the demise of the traditional family funeral director" (1989).

From this it can be seen that the owners of new independent firms are likely to exhibit



greater business acumen. This contrasts with past generations of funeral directors who could depend upon a seemingly endless supply of work as a result of years of establishment in a community, and who tended to be tied to the confines of a branch office. Recognising a niche market and the needs of specific groupings, such as the Afro-Caribbean or gay communities or solely specializing in Hindu or Muslim funerals are examples of new small business owners demonstrating a willingness to meet a specific demand in contrast to merely supplying funerals to a specification predetermined by the organization. Further business perception can be detected in the promotion of new organizations through carefully organized public relations events, the formation of links with appropriate community groups and charitable work - all contact creating.

In an attempt not to be undermined by the growing strength of the independent firm, the large organizations have adopted measures to protect their market position. Firstly, as part of a strategy to reinstate the "family" nature of the business, in 1992 the Great Southern Group adopted the name Family Funeral Directors Ltd for its retail funeral subsidiary, an identity retained by SCI. Clearly each branch office is not owned by a family, but like a similar situation with a nationwide chain of retail butchers, the employment of such a title denotes not the ownership status but represents a claim that it serves the needs of the whole family.

The success of SFO and other new independent firms indicates that two major barriers to entry traditionally perceived by the industry for new funeral directing firms must be reappraised.

Firstly, the capital cost of establishment and capital outlay are barriers to entry as existing firms contributing to the first Monopolies and Mergers Commission reported (MMC 1987: 35). However, from the number of independent businesses that have emerged, a proportion appear to have started with a minimum of capital and basic resources and expanded according to growth. It is interesting to note that an organization contributing evidence to the first Monopolies and Mergers Commission report - the CWS - stated that no "substantial" barriers to entry existed and in confirmation cited evidence of the number of recent entrants in Scotland (MMC 1987: 29). The second barrier is the absence of a reputation. As has been illustrated, the latter is of considerable importance to success, and is generated by the individual representing the organization. Thus it is not surprising that those establishing their own business have generally had experience in the industry - usually with a large organization - and are therefore in an ideal position to capitalize upon existing personal as opposed to corporate reputation in an area. Thus contacts would be maintained through recognition of the individual funeral director's name. Whilst restraint of trade clauses appear to be written into contracts held by a new employees, this may have been difficult in circumstances where acquisitions are made and existing staff are unwilling to agree new terms.

The rationale for new entry into the market particularly by former employees of large organizations can be seen to emanate essentially from the dissatisfaction with the prevailing *modus operandi* of the centralized firm. Opening in business may be the only solution to the employee remaining in the industry. As Scase and Goffee note:

"...business formation and growth is often not an outcome of exceptional personal capacities of drive, determination and ambition, but a function of various forms of personal discontent and random occurrence" (1987: 33).

Through increasing consumer awareness of price, standards and, to a limited degree, ownership and in view of the greater business acumen of the owners, especially of new firms, it is likely that they will be regarded as providers of a highly personal service. However, whilst this will increase competition, the lack of regulation, such as licensing, mandatory adherence to a code of practice or possession of experience and qualification prior to trading continues to present to the consumer little in the way of safeguards or standards. The consequence of this is that new independent businesses may appear with the sole intention of experiencing short-term growth and selling to a competitor in the future. It is interesting to note that SCI are actively advocating statutory regulation for all funeral directors in a similar vein to licensing as found in the USA.<sup>1</sup>

Although it is argued that in respect of the trend of small businesses opening, there has been a resurgence of small family firms in the industry, problems that these organizations faced in the 1950-70s, mainly that of succession, are destined to occur again. In such circumstances these organizations may present themselves for acquisition. However, if firms like SCI or other large organizations cannot make

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<sup>1</sup> "SCI calls for more regulatory control over funerals" (1996) Funeral Service Journal Vol111 no12 December pp 25-27



acquisitions through governmental restriction and another buyer cannot be located, their closure would ultimately create a problem particularly for the bereaved.

### Jobs for the Boys?

A final area which is relevant to mention in terms of general organizational change is the gender issue. Although this section will consider the role of females in the disposal process, by way of an introduction it is worth considering the significant contribution made by women in the death and dying arena since the 1960s (Walter 1993: 277). The writings of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross have appeared since the middle 1960s followed by Pincus in the 1970s (1974). It was Dame Cicely Saunders who founded the hospice movement and more recently contributions to both general and academic areas of death and disposal have been made by female writers such as Gittings (1984), Richardson (1988), Naylor (1989), Hockey (1990), Howarth (1992), Littlewood (1992) and Firth (1996). Cline's (1995) text contains a whole chapter dedicated to examining the role of women funeral directors.

As chapter 3 illustrated, preparation of the body was formerly a role undertaken by women following death at home. However, as deaths increasingly occurred in the institutionalized environment their function was eclipsed by the male embalmer who utilized a scientific technique thus out-modifying the basic washing and dressing that laying out involved. Whilst this transition almost completely dispensed with the role of women in any disposal-related activity, in recent years there has been a noted reversal.

The significance of such a change is important as it can be identified in line with the emergence of the independent business offering a personal service frequently operated as a family unit.

Whilst it is doubtful that the wives of undertakers were employed in the funeral industry around the turn of the century for reasons of prevailing social norms, evidence exists of gradual increase during the last few decades. The principal reasons behind this increase are:

Firstly, the increased administrative nature of funeral directing resulting from external legislation and internal operational procedures permit females to be employed in a specialist capacity without the necessity to become involved in heavy manual tasks, such as body-handling. However, it should be noted that whilst the overall ratio of female funeral operatives remains low, the number of female embalmers reflects the availability of lifting and hoist apparatus thus reducing the necessity for physical exertion.

Secondly, whilst the operational style of the large organizations contrast significantly to the small family firm, in the area of gender, opportunities for the employment of women have increased. With task demarcation being a characteristic of the large organization, funeral arranging and receptionist duties can be created as part-time roles, thus attracting females in a similar manner that other service industries have encountered. Furthermore, large organizations such as the Co-operatives actively encourage equal opportunities and in fulfilment of this policy employ females in

administrative and other roles. Many job advertisements for residential branch staff request a husband and wife team, so when the husband is absent conducting funerals his partner is minding the office and at other times present in a supportive role.

Thirdly, the suitability of the female in roles adjacent to the funeral director's tasks can also be seen to be accountable for the increase. The bereavement organization CRUSE was founded by a woman (Margaret Torrie) primarily for widows, although now it is all-embracing. Women make up a significant number of their counsellors and in parallel with funeral arranging there appears to be a gendered empathy to help at a time of loss. In August 1996 the first women-only funeral directing firm was announced.<sup>2</sup>

(ii) Consumer-driven changes upon funerals and the work of the funeral director.

It is likely that consumer awareness concerning issues surrounding funerals will increase in the future. Whilst on one level the practice of obtaining telephone quotations has already been considered it is the involvement of the bereaved in funeral preparation and ritual that is likely to increase. Varying degrees of these strategies of reclamation (Parsons 1995b) can be detected, firstly, through total reclamation of the funeral from the funeral director, or secondly, through partial reclamation.

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<sup>2</sup> See The Daily Telegraph Sunday 4 August 1996 - "Martha's Funerals".



The first strategy pivots around the concept of organizing a do-it-yourself (DIY) funeral. Although Mitford (1963: 220) points out an isolated occurrence in the 1960s, in recent years examples have attracted considerable media interest (Spottiswood 1987 & 1991). An extensive array of literature now proliferates on how to arrange such a funeral (Age Concern 1990; Walter 1991a; Albery, Elliot and Elliot 1993; Bartlett 1994; Alberry et al 1995; Gill and Fox 1996) as well as issues such as burying in a back garden (Bradfield 1993 & 1994; Hepburn 1994; Nicolson 1994). The DIY funeral involves obtaining or constructing a coffin, collecting and storing the deceased, arranging documentation and liaising with the cemetery or crematorium and transportation of the coffin - all services customarily provided by the funeral director. The primary inference for the rationale behind the DIY funeral is understood to be the therapeutic value of involvement in the whole proceedings as a means of coming to terms with death. Those who have participated in DIY have spoken of the "privilege" (Albery, Elliot and Elliot 1993: 122) of doing so and often remark upon the celebratory disposition of the whole ritual, especially if planned in advance and in conjunction with the deceased. However, it is clear that a main reason for undertaking a DIY funeral is to reclaim it from the funeral director and two reasons for this can be identified; firstly control and impersonality and secondly finance.

Firstly, the increase in control during this century that funeral directors possess over the disposal process has been a key theme throughout this thesis. The funeral director is the director, stage manager and in some respects assumes the role of a principal actor alongside allied functionaries - particularly the minister. Through total participation - real involvement - in the disposal process the funeral director (and quite often the

officiant) is replaced. Control is thus in the grasp of those now performing this rite of passage. In addition, the problems associated with personalization are addressed. Functionaries are no longer involved when the funeral director and priest are replaced. However, it should be pointed out that whilst the DIY funeral does dispense with the funeral director, formal organizations such as the crematorium have to be circumnavigated and compliance with their rules and bureaucratic procedures must still be contended with. Whilst one disabling profession (Walter 1994: 17) is avoided others remain and certainly in respect of cremation cannot be surmounted.

Secondly, costs are obviously reduced but not eliminated. By not employing the services of a funeral director there will be a degree of expenditure on the coffin (or whatever receptacle is used), transportation and of course disbursements. It is this latter aspect of reclaiming the funeral from the funeral director and not encountering his bill which will perhaps provide the greatest satisfaction to those who perform DIY funerals.

However, in the attempt to undermine the work of this functionary, literature surrounding DIY funerals frequently deals with important practical elements such as body storage, preparation and transportation in a highly superficial manner. From examining the advice offered in some publications concerning laying-out, the instructions manifest no resemblance to what can be experienced in reality. Furthermore whilst the aspect of spoilt performance is all too apparent to the funeral director through experience of schedules at crematoria, it is unlikely that the bereaved may be fully aware of the time constraints that exist. In disregarding this fact the space

of other families may be ignored. Without full consultation and liaison with the crematorium officials over aspects such as constructing a coffin that does not leak, that can actually be charged into a hot cremator and also complies with the provisions of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, a risk element certainly exists with DIY cremations.

It is appropriate to point out at this stage the argument advanced by Gill and Fox (1996) in respect of the financial benefits offered by pre-paid funeral plans and the aspect of mourner participation - an issue discussed later in these conclusions. They contend that the plans will lead to increased "fossilization" of funeral service:

"While they are mechanisms for dealing with financial anxiety, they will become a reactionary force inhibiting change or a re-look at the way we think about funerals. As a legal contract of service, with specified details, that is going to be entered into and signed up, maybe thirty years before it is acted upon, no-one will give authority to change any of the details when the time comes. The proliferation of these schemes will actively prevent change and increase fossilization of the service."

(Gill and Fox 1996: 21).

Among all the literature and media focus there does not appear to be much evidence to suggest that in practice DIY funerals are being widely carried out. As Walter (1991a: 81) rightly asserts not all bereaved people will want to arrange such a funeral. It is perhaps more correct to assert that many would not be able to do so, preferring to



employ a specialist. It is in circumstances where death occurs through a sudden or violent circumstances, for example as a result of a road traffic accident that the prospect of a DIY funeral would be inconceivable. Nevertheless the facility exists and has always been in existence for DIY funerals to take place for those desiring what can be seen as a further post-Fordist reaction to funeral management.

The second issue relating to consumer-driven change upon funerals concerns partial reclamation which, like the first strategy, is linked to the awareness of alternatives to that which the funeral director supplies as part of an inclusive charge. Essentially, there are two forces behind the desire to create awareness of alternatives and increased consumer choice. Firstly, the funeral "supermarket" movement.

In the early part of 1996 two funeral supermarkets opened in the London area.<sup>3</sup> Both offer clients an array of goods literally "off the shelf", such as coffins, memorials and urns in a "one stop shop". In addition to the goods, services such as arranging the funeral as well as viewing and embalming facilities also exist. The concept behind the supermarket is to

"...encourage...[the public]...to browse in a familiar supermarket environment with clear itemization, pricing and substantial cost savings" (FSJ March 1996: 10).

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<sup>3</sup> see Funeral Service Journal Vol 111 No3 March 1996

The supermarket concept differs from the DIY funeral in as much as the former supplies goods and services that would otherwise be acquired from sources outside the funeral industry. For example, the coffin would be made by a member of the family. It is not possible to comment on the success of both ventures due to the short period of operation. However, with both goods and services available to the bereaved it would appear that the supermarket is little more than a funeral director's premises with a large showroom.

The second thrust has come from the National Funerals College in the form of a consultation document - "The Dead Citizens Charter" (1996).<sup>4</sup> Whilst the Charter does not advocate dispensing with the services of the funeral director it calls for a higher level of personalization and for the right for the bereaved to make choices. Its clauses are far-reaching and embrace all organizations currently involved in the disposal of the dead in addition to revising the common law principle of the duties of executors. The same year also saw the publication of the "The Charter for the Bereaved" issued by the Institute of Burial and Cremation Administration. Both Charters parallel on many issues and particularly emphasis the right of choice by the bereaved.

The Charter advocates more personalization through pre-death preparation and through mourner participation (Parsons 1995b). From the perspective of the funeral director it is significant to note that the issue of continuity between funeral arranger

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<sup>4</sup>See Jupp (1995) for a full account of the National Funerals College.

and conductor remarked upon in chapters 4 & 5 appears in the Charter at item No17:

"...recommends that...families meet the funeral director who will  
conduct the funeral".

It is very difficult to predict the precise direction of change within the funeral industry over the next decade. However, we can be certain that the intensifying competition which is a feature of advanced economies in general can be expected to increase the pressure for greater flexibility in order to meet the demands of a rapidly changing market. That is to say a market which will reflect the needs generated by an increasing diversity of life-styles, and hence, presumably, "death-styles". Such a range of demands would seem to favour small family-based firms. However, whether the necessary flexibility will be provided predominantly by genuine independent family firms or by offshoots of much larger but increasingly de-centralised organizations remains to be seen.



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